

Responses To 9/11

Individual and collective dimensions

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In India, as elsewhere, every person understood that cry for help, the horror and fear writ large on terror stricken faces, the trauma in the choked voices of people who saw it happen, the hopeless struggle to control an imminent breakdown in public, the unspeakable grief. For one moment, the pain and suffering of others became our own. In a flash, everyone recognised what is plain but easily forgotten: that inscribed in our personal selves is not just our separateness from others but also sameness with them, that despite all socially constructed differences of language, culture, religion, nationality, perhaps even race, caste and gender, and over and above every culturally specific collective identity, we share something in common. Amidst terror, acute vulnerability and unbearable sorrow, it was not America alone that rediscovered its lost solidarity but across the globe, almost everyone who heard, saw or read about these cataclysmic events seemed to reclaim a common humanity.

As we empathised with those who escaped or witnessed death and relived the traumatic experience of those who lost their lives, we knew of a grave, irreparable wrong done to individuals, killed, wounded or traumatised by the sudden loss of family and friends. These individuals were not just subjected to physical hurt or mental trauma, they were recipients and carriers of a message embodied in that heinous act: from now on they must live with a dreadful sense of their own vulnerability. This message was transmitted first to other individuals in New York and Washington, then quickly to citizens throughout the democratic world. The catastrophe on the US east coast has deepened the sense of insecurity of every individual on this planet.

However, this was not the entire text of messages sent by the perpetrators. The rest is revealed when we focus on our collective identities, or rather on the collective dimensions of the tragedy that unfolded on that terrible, Terrible Tuesday. Unlike the first, which allows a plain and simple good to be distinguished from unambiguous evil, these messages were disturbingly ambivalent, morally fuzzy and less likely to sift good from evil, more likely to divide rather than unite people across the world. One such message which the poor, the powerless and the culturally marginalised would always like to have communicated to the rich, powerful and the culturally dominant, although not in this beastly manner, is this: we have grasped that any injustice done to us is erased before it is seen or spoken about, that in the current international social order, we count for very little; our ways of life are hope-

lessly marginalised, our lives utterly valueless. Even middle-class Indians with cosmopolitan aspirations became painfully aware of this when a countrywise list of missing or dead persons was flashed on an international news channel: hundreds of Britons, scores of Japanese, some Germans, three Australians, two Italians, one Swede. A few buttons away, a South Asian channel listed names of several hundred missing or dead Indians, while another flashed the names of thousands with messages of their safety to relatives back home.

Hard as it was to acknowledge in the immediate aftermath of September 11, it must be admitted that the attacks on New York and Washington were also meant to lower the collective self-esteem of Americans, to rupture their pride. Not all intentional wrongdoing is physically injurious to the victim but every intentionally generated physical suffering is invariably accompanied by intangible wounds. The attack on September 11 did not merely demolish concrete buildings and individual people. It tried to destroy the American measure of its own self-worth, to diminish the self-esteem of Americans. Quite separate from the immorality of physical suffering caused, isn't this attempt itself morally condemnable? Yes, if the act further lowered the self-worth of a people already devoid of it. But this is hardly relevant in the case of America, where sections of the ruling elite ensure that its collective self-worth borders on supreme arrogance, always over the top. Does not the Pentagon symbolise this false collective pride? Amidst this carnage, then, is the sobering thought that occurs more naturally to poor people of powerless countries, that occasionally even the mighty can be humbled. In such societies, the genuine anguish of people at disasters faced by the rich is mixed up with an unspeakable emotion, which on such apocalyptic occasions, people experience only in private or talk about only in whispers.

The whispering did not continue for long. Soon, left-oriented intellectuals the world over appealed vociferously to the Americans to explore the deeper reasons that underlie terrorism, pointing towards America's dubious foreign policy that has caused millions to suffer in Vietnam, Chile, Palestine, Iraq and Sudan, to name just a few countries. Madeline Albright's infamous remark that justified the suffering and death of Iraqi children ricocheted from newspaper reports to television channels. Americans were coaxed to re-examine what their leaders do in their name. American ignorance and innocence was ridiculed: if only ordinary Americans cared to look at what was really going on alongside the American way of life and the rhetoric of freedom, they would begin to understand what happened on September 11 and why many ordinary people in the non-Western world were overcome with the feeling that it was more or less what America deserved.

Naturally, American intellectuals reacted with horror and disdain toward such 'ideological excuses for terrorism'. They asked if a grave wrong committed today could be justified by a wrong committed in the past, in a different context and time? Could America never do anything right and were Americans never allowed to be victims? Surely, there has to be a deep-rooted anti-American prejudice in most such intellectual responses from the non-Western world. They could respectfully listen to reasoned political opposition to American foreign policy but not accept the pathetic ideological reflex that was characteristic of these anti-American responses.

It is hard to deny the presence of prejudice, rhetoric and the sledgehammer of ideology in current critiques of America. And even harder to accept the view of the skeptic that

denies the very distinction between rhetoric and argument, between ideology and reasoned political theory. It is true of course that both reasoned political argument and ideology seek to win over others, but they do so in dramatically opposite ways. One, steadfastly committed to transparency, provides every conceivable reason for its principles and value-based conclusions, the other short-circuits moral values, reduces principles to formulae, almost always privileges the use of rhetoric over reason and permits half-truths, even lies.

Yet, for all the validity and usefulness of the distinction between reasoned political argument and ideology, we must try not to seal them off altogether or wholly overlook what they have in common. For a start, the world of the political theorist is not entirely devoid of rhetoric and emotion, nor is the universe of the ideologist completely lacking in reflexivity, internal coherence or rational thought. Likewise, no matter how well justified, a rationally defended belief system still contains an element of extra-rational preference and some prejudice. For all the justified complaints against ideology, in the end, we must also acknowledge the grain of truth it might contain about our world and us. No matter how exasperating its form and how crude its technique, we must attend to its content. At any rate, ideologies are shaped by their practical function, by the inherent logic of what they are meant to deliver, i.e., a broad conceptual map of the social and political world without which a political agent cannot think, decide or act. Ideologies are necessarily gestural, uncertain steps in the dark that may lead to invaluable and indispensable insights about the social and political world. Surely it must be admitted that reasoned political argument is not always necessary for this purpose and never sufficient. Reason may fine-tune some ideologies or help defeat others but it cannot replace them. Alas, even those of us who loath the form of ideology must closely attend to its content. The ideology of anti-Americanism must not be dismissed as prejudice standing against enlightened reason.

However, what appears to have invaded the public sphere well before and certainly after the air strikes is galaxies away from not only the careful, issue-based reasoned opposition to US foreign policy but also from the ideology of anti-Americanism. Way beneath the anti-Americanism of the ideologue lies a magma of impression, emotion and confused thought of ordinary people that just a while ago was self-directed and is now suddenly targeted at the other. It is this chaotic, sweltering, cesspool that non-Western intellectuals are trying to hold in their hands and then carry into the international public domain. It is quite wrong to call this ideology. Such mixtures of impressions and feelings, having settled slowly over the years, independent of our will, suddenly and unexpectedly reveal themselves under the impact of cataclysmic events. They are not content-less, however. Often, they are beliefs masquerading as feelings, the common man's interpretation of larger social and political situations based on directly felt experience and the itsy-bitsy information filtering through to him, the ordinary person's very own causal account of her suffering, produced in her view by a chain of oppression that resides in her home but originates and begins its devious journey from somewhere in America. The cognitive content of these feelings is this: the world is governed by two sets of international laws, one exclusive to America and its allies, and the other for the rest of the non-Western world. A single American life is worth more than a thousand others. Is it such a remarkable fact that struggling harried people, breathing a trifle freely for the first time, sometimes in an incipient egalitarian society, wish

not to take any personal responsibility for their own enduring woes? That they overreact with anger, blame and *schadenfreude*? Not any more than to discover that people with excessive wealth and power are generally insensitive to those without it, that they do not even notice their existence.

Non-Western intellectuals are trying to open a chink for people in America and give them a glimpse of these convoluted feelings. This is frequently done not in the language of reasoned political theory but in a somewhat defective, coarse, shockingly brazen or insensitive form that, alas, is yet another import from the West. The irony is that many of these non-Western intellectuals are personally committed to the best ethical ideals developed in the West and are close cultural cousins of a typical Western intellectual. In all probability, they are not even liked by the people whose message they so earnestly carry. Culturally estranged, they appear shallow and hypocritical to them. In aligning themselves with the oppressed, and in trying to communicate their feelings, these intellectuals sow in themselves the seeds of a permanent schizophrenia.

I have pleaded with American intellectuals that they should pay attention to the content of feelings, not obsessively demand that they be expressed in their preferred form. However, I have a few sobering thoughts to share with my own non-American intellectual brethren. Insensitivity and ignorance is not a unique American fault. Much of the Indian elite is shockingly insensitive to the appalling conditions under which their fellow citizens live, and alarmingly ignorant of the horrors in large parts of Africa. How can we then expect the even more wealthy, powerful and privileged to be any different? Humans everywhere in the world tend to build a wall around themselves, and the more comfortable they are within these walls the less likely they are to notice those outside such walls. Perhaps this is a time for all of us to look within and catch this ugly, decidedly uncomfortable truth about ourselves.

I had also spoken above of two dimensions to the message hidden in the mangled remains of the destruction of September 11. The moral horror of the individual dimension of the carnage was unambiguous and overwhelming. But as we examined its collective dimension, a less clear, more confusing moral picture emerged. How, on balance, after putting together these two dimensions, were we to evaluate this complicated moral terrain? The answer had to be swift and unwavering. The focus then had to remain on the individual and the humanitarian. To shift our ethical compass in the direction of the collective would have weakened the moral claims of the suffering and the dead. And this was plainly wrong. Nor was it enough to have merely made a passing reference to the tragedy of individuals, a grudging concession before considering the weightier political crimes of a neo-imperial state. Then, as always in such situations, the moral claims of individuals are supreme. To have aggressively emphasised the collective dimension of the tragedy at an inopportune time was horribly indecent. But equally, to have screened off the collective dimension, to have ignored what ordinary people in the non-Western world feel, would have obstructed our understanding of how tragedies of individuals can be prevented in future; surely, this would only perpetuate another already existing moral wrong.

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