The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

Siri Hustvedt: 9/11 and the American psyche

Twenty years later, the political and psychological consequences of the attack have become more intelligible

Siri Hustvedt 6 HOURS AGO

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There are events that fix themselves in memory because even as they are happening, the person living through them knows she has been rocked by a moment that later will be called "history".

On April 9 1940, my grandmother woke my mother with the words: "Get up, it's war." The Nazis had invaded Norway. My American father was a first-year college student puzzling over a paper on Savonarola, the 15th-century Christian reformer who went on a maniacal mission to cleanse Florence of vice, when he was called up for active army duty in the fall of 1942. He happily swept the index cards into a waste basket.

On September 11 2001, my husband and I stood at the window on the top floor of our house in Brooklyn and looked out at the smoke rising from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. By then we knew a plane had hit the building. We saw the second plane go in on live television and understood the crash was not an accident. I recall exactly what I said: "Now it has come to us."

By "it" I meant human carnage caused by other human beings. Atrocities of various kinds at various scales with various ideological meanings are often signalled by abbreviation. White Man's Burden, the Belgian Congo, Trail of Tears, Ku Klux Klan, Auschwitz, gulag, Hiroshima, the Cultural Revolution, apartheid, Khmer Rouge, My Lai, the disappeared, Oklahoma City and Rwandan genocide are a few of many examples.

By “us” I meant my family, my beloved friends, and my town, New York. Although it was stupid, I did not think “America”, not until I knew the Pentagon had been hit. With the unspeakable calm that descends on the shocked, I called to make sure my 14-year-old daughter, Sophie, who had taken the subway for the first time alone from Brooklyn to Manhattan for her first day in a new school, had arrived. I then made calls to my family in lower Manhattan to confirm that my sisters, Asti and Ingrid, my brothers-in law, Jon and Bruce, my two-year-old niece, Ava, and my six-year-old niece, Juliette, who attended school three blocks north of the towers, had survived the collapse of the buildings.

Smoke rises from Lower Manhattan, September 11 2001 © Alex Webb/Magnum Photos

"9/11" became the truncated reference for the devastation on that day in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, the political, psychological and ethical consequences of 9/11 and the "war on terror" that followed in its wake have become more intelligible. In the days and weeks after the attacks, I realised my response to "it" was at odds with both media coverage and politics in Washington. The massacre was horrifying and, to my mind, the ideology behind it reprehensible, but I did not regard 9/11 as "unbelievable", a word repeatedly used to describe the day. How could anyone with a sense of history find it unbelievable? When irony was pronounced dead by pundits, I was appalled. Perhaps people had confused irony with cynicism — a cold shield erected against the suffering of others. Irony requires distance and a doubling of meaning but, as Soren Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus notes: "The presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that."

The New Yorker rolled out anointed literati to wax maudlin over the day. As exploded corpses mingled with iron and glass in the rubble, John Updike ended his muddled piece with this elegant if pointless sentence: "The fresh sun shone on the eastward facades, a few boats tentatively moved in the river, the ruins were still sending out smoke, but New York looked glorious."

Jonathan Franzen declared the task for "the new world, the zeroes world of George Bush, will be to reassert the ordinary, the trivial, and even the ridiculous in the face of instability and dread". The denial manifest in such a sentiment is flabbergasting.

People hold the US flag up to passing cars in the days after 9/11 © Paul Fusco/Magnum Photos

Susan Sontag was alone in pointing out that US alliances and actions were not irrelevant to the attacks, that the perpetrators might be many things but they were not "cowards", and that "the unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy". She was attacked by many. A writer in the New Republic began with this opening salvo: "What do Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Susan Sontag have in common?"

Serious debate about the event was missing from mainstream coverage. Consolidated ownership may well have played a role. In 1983, 90 per cent of US media was controlled by 50 corporations; by 2000, that number had shrunk to six. The terrible losses of 9/11 were exploited on television to create further spectacle from the original spectacular event, one that was arguably made for visual media in blatant imitation of the Hollywood blockbuster. The networks added cinematic effects: American flags imposed over footage of firefighters at "ground zero"; images from the day as montage set to appropriately grandiose, sentimental music. Although the World Trade Center victims came from more than 50 countries, the assault was swiftly turned into an orgy of bellicose American "patriotism".

On September 14, Congress voted to approve a measure that gave the president sweeping powers to "use all necessary and appropriate force" in Afghanistan and any country involved in the 9/11 attacks or which harboured those responsible for them. Democratic congresswoman Barbara Lee of California cast the single dissenting vote against the resolution. "You are a dog," wrote one angry citizen, "Not even an American dog, a black mutt." The familiar rhetoric of "us" and "them," the Manichean discourse of "good" and "evil" took hold with stunning swiftness.

Sontag and Lee became the enemy. As a black woman, Lee was targeted not only as a traitor but as an inhuman "other", part of the long racist story in the US that codes "American" as "white". In an essay, "Critical Notes on the Verbal Climate", written in 2005, I referred to the "angel/devil discourse" of the political present: "No one in New York who saw the devastation wrought on September 11 would argue that those who planned and orchestrated that horror are not dangerous, but the Bush administration has manipulated the terror we all felt that day to ostracise many of the people it is supposed to represent." I added that the administration's language was strikingly similar to the rhetoric of al-Qaeda, which spews "venom at the west and 'the enemies of Islam'".

On October 11 2001, President George W Bush declared: "The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilised world." In his 2017 inaugural address, Donald Trump vowed to "unite the civilised world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth".

The language of "our" civilisation under attack resonated with a much-touted article published in 1993 by Harvard professor Samuel P Huntington: "The Clash of Civilizations?" Huntington's grand vision reinvigorated a cold war-like division between "the west" and everyone else, which focused particularly on Islamic and Chinese civilisations: "The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." In a 1998 lecture, Edward Said objected: "There are no insulated cultures or civilisations. Any attempt made to separate them into . . . watertight compartments . . . does damage to their variety, their diversity, their sheer complexity of elements, their radical hybridity." Unfortunately, ambiguity is not a rallying cry.

Talk of complexity and indistinct borders will not ignite a nation to go to war. At least Huntington acknowledged other cultures as civilisations. Bush and Trump pitted civilised folk against the barbarians, borrowing the language of colonial empire. The rhetoric of politicians, media and scholars requires a receptive audience. It must resonate with deeply felt national mythologies.

US troops survey burning oil fields in south-west Iraq, 2003 © Alex Majoli/Magnum Photos

The idea that the US is more virtuous than other places in the world and God is our ally in messianic missions abroad has deep roots. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called this "the myth of American innocence". The irony, as Niebuhr saw it, lay in the reality that many of the country's dreams have been "so cruelly refuted by history".

Innocence is bound to "American exceptionalism" — the US is unique and superior among nations. A country that slaughtered and displaced its indigenous peoples, fought a civil war over slavery and has a long history of entwined racism, xenophobia and misogyny is not innocent, exceptional or unique. What is unique is the promise of the language enshrined in a founding document: "All men are created equal." It actually meant all free white males with property are created equal, but once an idea is set loose, it is bound to fire the imaginations of those who have been excluded from that bold rhetorical flourish.

The “war on terror”, a massive mobilisation of power that would alter the American and international psycho-political landscape, was the catalyst for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and interventions in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia and Ethiopia. This month, the Watson Institute of Brown University’s Costs of War project released a study in which the authors estimate that 929,000 people have been killed in these efforts, 387,000 of them civilians. They estimate that 38m people have been displaced by the war on terror. Guantánamo Bay, extraordinary rendition, black sites and Abu Ghraib can join my earlier list of atrocious abbreviations.

A US bomb blasts a Taliban position north of Kabul, Afghanistan, October 29 2001 © Scott Peterson/Getty Images

The capaciously defined “war” justified the Patriot Act, which increased surveillance and curtailed the civil rights of all US citizens, but the ongoing aura of emergency about foreign terror over two decades played an old xenophobic, racist melody. Before 9/11, the worst terror attack on “American soil” was Oklahoma City, where 168 people died.

Media coverage of one of the terrorists, the white rightwing extremist Timothy McVeigh, played down his ties to neo-fascist Christian groups. The Washington Post, on July 2 1995: “In deeply disturbing ways he is a prototype of his generation. He lived the divorce revolution, age 10 when his parents split . . . He hit the job market in the mid-1980s as it ran out of room for young men with blue collar skills. Aware of affirmative action for women and minorities, he began to feel short-changed as a white male.” Just your average white boy gone off the deep end.

In 1790, Congress limited naturalisation to a “free white person”. After the civil war it was extended to “aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent”. Until 1952, naturalisation required status as either white or black. As millions of new immigrants entered the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ambiguity invaded that binary, and a number of people sued the courts to be declared white.

In his book *White by Law* (1996), Ian Haney López notes that American courts declared Syrians white in 1909, 1910 and 1915 but non-white in other cases in 1913 and 1914. The legal gymnastics involved in these cases serve as a grim reminder of the dangers that arrive when we categorise human beings as part of fictional racial taxonomies to determine their “identities”.

After 9/11, Arab, Muslim and south Asian Americans, like Japanese Americans before them during the second world war, were swept into the brutal politics of guilt by racist association. The sociologist Louise Cainkar frames the problem as an issue of gradually diminishing whiteness: “Arab Americans, who once benefited from the perquisites of whiteness, became non-white as a result of social processes taking place over an extended period of time that defined them as different from and inferior to whites.”

A girl at the annual Muslim Day Parade in Manhattan, 2016 © Stephanie Keith/Reuters

By 9/11, stereotypes of Arabs, fuelled by the foreign policy of a superpower rather than domestic realities, were well established. In its 1984 report, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination League noted the media's "images of greedy oil sheikhs and bloodthirsty terrorists". These are male stereotypes. Equally defamatory is the widespread image of any woman in a hijab as a passive, silent victim of misogyny. Irony strikes again: the American mainstream press was mostly silent about domestic misogyny as a factor in the 2016 election.

Cainkar lists the government powers unleashed on American citizens deemed suspicious by ethnic and/or religious identity — "closed hearings, secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney/client conversations, FBI interviews, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration". After 9/11 the number of hate crime incidents against Muslims exploded. In 2011, President Barack Obama ended the mandatory registration of visa-holding males over 16 from 26 countries, most of which were predominantly Muslim. The war on terror continued. Obama inherited the war in Afghanistan and notoriously escalated drone strikes, many of which killed civilians.

The first black American president, Barack Hussein Obama, was no radical but the simple fact of him inflamed the right and opened a path for the "birther" lie. A black man cannot be an American — he must be a Muslim born in Africa. The lie fell on well-tilled ground. Trump is not a historical anomaly. His performative rage against "them" has many antecedents in American history.

The carnival atmosphere among the predominantly white crowd that attacked the Capitol on January 6, people who did nothing to hide their faces from the cameras, who brandished Confederate flags and celebrated violence as if it were their right, reminded me of nothing so much as a public lynching, a "spectacle lynching", complete with gallows. Documentation abounds of smiling white people who posed for photographs in front of or behind tortured black corpses, confident of their impunity. After all, they had the law and God on their side. A number of the groups who engineered the Capitol attack regard themselves as "holy warriors" in the cause of Christian whiteness.

As the US loses another war, this time in Afghanistan, and rule is returned to the Taliban, who justify their brutality in the name of God and patrol the streets like latter-day Savonarolas to sniff out blasphemy and vice, perhaps irony that does not exclude earnestness is allowed.

People watch the burning from Brooklyn Bridge on September 11 © Alex Webb / Magnum Photos

As I stood at the window and watched smoke fill a cloudless blue sky, I could not have predicted the destruction around the world that would follow from that morning, but I knew enough to resist the American hubris of exceptionalism and nonsense about “the civilised world” in a struggle with bestial others. I knew enough to place 9/11 in the context of other gruesome crimes human beings visit on one another.

Isn’t it ironic that congresswoman Barbara Lee, still in office, who was widely viewed as treasonous and attacked as “a black mutt”, an epithet that combines racism and misogyny, now called “misogynoir”, is being hailed as “an ignored oracle”? Isn’t it ironic, too, that all those years ago, she advised her colleagues to find distance, the very distance required for irony itself to appear: “Our country is in a state of mourning. Some of us must say, let’s step back for a moment. Let’s just pause, just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today, so that this does not spiral out of control.”

Siri Hustvedt’s ‘Mothers, Fathers, and Others’, a new collection of essays, will be published in December by Sceptre

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