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Trauma, lies and exceptionalism

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Shortly after September 11, Ariel Dorfman, the renowned Chilean playwright, recalled another September 11 twenty-eight years earlier, on which “death irrevocably entered our lives and changed us forever” after a CIA sponsored military coup toppled the newly elected Salvador Allende and the emergent democracy in Chile. The deaths of thousands of people who “disappeared” during General Augusto Pinochet’s rule – unremembered and unlamented by much of the rest of the world – were of course less visible, hence less dramatic than those in the US on 9/11. But while this neither makes those lives any less significant nor their loss any less painful, it should – suggests Dorfman – serve to remind us of the universality of people’s suffering, no matter its particular forms.

To Dorfman, this exercise in historical remembering is crucial for recognizing that both September 11s opened up “one of those opportunities for regeneration and self-knowledge that, from time to time, is given to certain nations.” An opportunity like this, he says, can be used for “renewal or destruction...for good or for evil, for peace or for war, for aggression or for reconciliation, for vengeance or for justice, for the militarisation of a society or its humanisation.” Which path a nation chooses to pursue will depend on whether or not its people are willing “to admit that their suffering is neither unique nor exclusive.” And this requires them to look “in the vast mirror of our common humanity.”

Dorfman, of course, is among those who have been engaged in helping his people recover some sense of their shared humanity in the aftermath of a brutal military dictatorship. But will the US, he wonders, also allow itself to look into this mirror in the wake of 9/11 and, equally importantly, will it reciprocate the compassion shown to it by the majority of the world’s people who have come forward to claim the US’s dead as their own?

The signs so far are that the US will not – tragically, for all those who will suffer the consequences of the refusal of mutual recognition.

Although it is still too early to talk definitively about the psychological, emotional, and political legacies of 9/11, one of them has been to entrench most Americans in their belief that their pain is in fact exceptional. Far from recognizing that they have joined others in feeling “what the rest of us have known” (to quote Dorfman), average Americans regard their trauma as unique because they view themselves as being unique. How else could so many of them say without a trace of unease that terrorism and violence may exist

elsewhere but “not here. *I live here?*” (I am quoting from an essay circulated on the net by an “average American” but I have heard most people profess the same thing.)

If this view of their own particularism keeps most Americans from recognizing others as equally human, it also and necessarily stifles their compassion. The 82% majority that backs George W Bush’s policies feels no compunction about wreaking indiscriminate death and destruction in retaliation for 9/11. The loss of thousands of innocent lives in the hunt for potential (not only actual) terrorists, it claims, is no different than the loss of innocent lives in the US, not only making two wrongs into a right, but also echoing the (il)logic of those who call for the indiscriminate killing of Americans as a way to retaliate against US policies. People simply evade recognizing any parallels between these two positions by labeling one *justice* and the other *vengeance*.

Sadly, the present political leadership in the United States also does not have the foresight or sagacity to use 9/11 as an opportunity for renewal, reconciliation, and humanisation. On the contrary, the broadening scope of Washington’s “war against terrorism,” which is taking troops from Afghanistan to the Philippines to Yemen, and its strident nationalism, which is shutting down public debate on the ethical and political consequences of this war, are doing the opposite.

In this context, one must wonder at the dangerous and self-defeating cynicism of two of the US policies: the decision – soon rescinded – to set up an office in the Pentagon for telling people lies about the war effort and reviving the so-called “shadow government” i.e., the CIA with a restored mandate to destabilize countries and to kill and assassinate anyone considered suspect, practices that the Congress banned as illegal several years ago.

Bill Moyers, a former speechwriter for many US presidents and certainly no left-wing ideologue, has documented the CIA’s “dirty tricks,” as he calls them, from Asia to Africa to Latin America. In country after country, the CIA instigated the overthrow and murder of popular and democratically elected leaders (Mussadegh, Lumumba, Arbenz, Allende), leaving behind legacies of repression, festering anger, and political extremism.

When these activities first came to light, few intellectuals or governmental leaders were willing to defend them, though they certainly had their advocates. Patriotism then meant recognizing that some things were too unsavory to be associated (at least openly) with the US. To most people of commonsense and goodwill it also was clear that Americans could never be safe in a world which their own policies were helping to destabilize.

Today, unfortunately, patriotism is being confused with telling lies and believing them. Two of the most pernicious are that people hate Americans because “we” are good and “they” are evil and not because of anything “we” may have done to “them,” and, second, that the US’s worldwide war will eliminate terrorists, not help to breed new ones.

If Dorfman is right that for Americans to overcome the trauma of 9/11 they must abandon the myth of their exceptionalism, then it seems that most Americans would rather live

with their trauma than embrace the reality that they are as unexceptional as everyone else. And sadly, it is a new definition of patriotism that is helping to keep alive the lie that the US is exceptional enough to live safely in a world made dangerous partly by itself.

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