

*Phil Scraton (ed) (2002) Beyond September 11:
An Anthology of Dissent, Pluto, London, ISBN 0 7453 1962 9*

Books about September 11 and the 'War on Terror' have become a veritable growth industry since 2001. This edited book, published in 2002, was one of the first and is still one of the best. Many of its 35 chapters agree that, despite the cliché of the September 11 genre, the world did not change on that date; rather, causal relations long since set in train produced effects which were suddenly and globally manifest. Christian Parenti (pp 10–19), for example, writing while smoke still seeped from the ruins of the twin towers, identifies a 'boomerang' in the turning back against the US empire of the Islamic fundamentalist militias that were nurtured and fostered by it in fighting for the downfall of the Soviet Union, notably in Afghanistan. 'America's open-ended jihad is precisely the type of policy that will compound the existing problems from which emerged the four suicidal jet-bombs of September 11' (p 18).

This collection was produced in the context of the aftermath of the US-led war in Afghanistan, before the October 12, 2002 bombings in Bali and before the return of the US to war in Iraq. A measure of its insight is the extent to which it remains relevant in these contexts, as the 'war on terror' moves to new battles and fields. Indeed, several chapters of the book are remarkably prescient about the determination of the USA to seize the pretext of September 11 to mount war in Iraq. Other chapters deal with how the 'war on terror', both on the battlefield and the home front, trashes international law and tramples human rights, abetted by populist opportunism of political leaders, supine and domesticated media, in the interests of 'business as usual'. 'There have never been as many business opportunities around as now', Dave Whyte quotes General Electric Chairman Jack Welch as saying in October 2001 (pp 150, 156n).

Editor Phil Scraton's introduction canvasses and critiques the popular 'explanations' to which the book offers dissent: the headline vocabulary that the root causes of terrorism are irrational, pathological, evil — "wicked" beyond "humanity" — and that the 'war' on terrorism is one of civilisation against barbarism (p 2). This ideological account 'captures — then imprisons — the imagination' (p 2), and serves to justify unconditional war and the jettisoning of the rule of law. It militates against a rational understanding of September 11. Scraton observes, and the book analyses, 'How easy it is to hijack the spirit of grief, the heartfelt expressions of sympathy and public display of empathy' (p 3). This resort to manipulation and propaganda masks a 'serious failure to come to terms with the origins, definitions and manifestations of terrorism' (p 7). The book struggles for just such a coming to terms.

The three dozen short chapters provide a mix of angles, disciplines, interests, scopes, styles; but all are critical and counter-hegemonic. There are contemporaneous journalistic gems from John Pilger (pp 19–30), Paul Foot (pp 35–40) and Robert Fisk (pp 211–216), of the sort which rapidly did the rounds on the internet when few dissenting voices could be raised in the mainstream, and those that were raised became savagely castigated. Big-picture academic responses such as that of Noam Chomsky (pp 66–71) emerged at the same time (November 3, 2001) and received similar treatment.

There are, in the book, as well as journalistic and contemporaneous accounts, more reflective, analytical and scholarly offerings from criminologists, lawyers, sociologists, and other fields, as well as pieces from political activists. Parenti convincingly explains the appeal of armed Islamic fundamentalism as the resort of many globally marginalised, expropriated and humiliated peoples across the 'arc of crisis' (p 14) from Afghanistan to Bosnia. 'With redistributive agendas of the Nasserite or Marxist variety vanquished, all that remains are the "socialisms of fools" — nationalism, anti-semitism, racism and messianic Political Islam' (p 17).

Pilger makes the point that, while imperialism is no longer fashionably spoken of, 'the West' continues to bring 'civilisation' to benighted lesser beings, as it controls and plunders them (p 20): 'An accounting of the sheer scale and continuity and consequences of American imperial violence is our élite's most enduring taboo' (p 21). He then proceeds to break that taboo, and outlines such an account, tracing the 'trail of blood'. He turns to analyse the taboo, the hypocrisy of the Western leaders and their ideologues — 'world opinion' (p 22) — bringing civilisation and inclusion, and the supine silence of intellectuals who decline to speak out (p 23). Chomsky underlines the point about continuity, when he recalls (p 68) that Winston Churchill referred to Afghans and Kurds as 'uncivilised tribes' 80 years ago, when he demanded the use of poison gas against them to instil 'a lively terror'. Elizabeth Stanley (p 206) reminds us that 11 September changed the world for those subjected to brutal repression, torture, 'disappearance' and exile following the coup d'état in Chile on that date in 1973. Notes Penny Green (p 74):

The US, while publicly denouncing terror, has long provided extensive international assistance to regimes which engage in state terrorism. Israel, Nicaragua, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola and Mozambique have all been beneficiaries of American aid and/or training. 'Terror' is a politically flexible term.

Chomsky records how the US ordered and resourced terrorist attacks against civilian 'soft targets' since the Reagan regime: in Nicaragua, Honduras, South America (pp 69–71). In the belly of the beast itself, observes Madeleine Bunting (p 34):

an ugly ruthlessness is creeping into American political culture. For example, 'physical interrogation' or torture is proposed in the columns of *Newsweek*, while President Bush signs an order allowing military tribunals of suspected terrorists in private and without a jury, for the first time since the Second World War.

Jude McCulloch (pp 54–59) traces how 'home front' measures justified as 'anti-terrorist' are part of the increasing militarisation of the police. Not only can 'counter-terrorism' be seen as a form of terrorism, she argues, but she shows how it actually provokes the sort of terrorist attacks it is supposed to be preventing. Bill Rolston's chapter (pp 59–66) shows this in the case of Ireland; state terror, from repressive military hardware to political assassinations, actually prolongs hostilities which can only eventually be resolved politically and by negotiation. He also points to the part played by control of the media, starting with the, at times laughable but effective, demonisation of 'terrorists' and the refusal to recognise the rationality of their supporters. Beyond censorship, state terrorism brings coercion to iron-fist media consent, as instanced in the 'coincidental' US bombing of the Al-Jazeera television station in Kabul. (We now know that a similar 'coincidental' shelling occurred in Baghdad). He quotes Edward Said (p 63):

I have been horrified at the hijacking of planes, the suicidal missions, the assassinations, the bombing of schools and hotels; horrified both at the terror visited upon its victims, and horrified by the terror in Palestinian men and women who were driven to such things.

Phil Scraton demonstrates that, ‘within this distorted world of “with us or against us” the casualties of war, regardless of their status as military or civilian, are held responsible; their losses, their injuries, their suffering reconstructed as self-inflicted’ (p 232). Whilever this distortion of the world continues, Scraton and this book argue, new generations of the marginalised oppressed will be called forth, and seeing themselves as freedom fighters will — like their oppressors — adopt methods of terror.

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