

**9/11: Making Enemies;
Some Uncomfortable Lessons for Europe**

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Abstract

The paper considers the political, bureaucratic and popular social construction of an enemy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The paper identifies the political/military elite of the USA as the centre of gravity of the process of construction. The initial steps in this construction process are recalled. The European reactions are noted. The British reactions are noted. Two conclusions are offered: firstly, formally, it is clear that political/military elites order their actions within the context of established discourses which if fractured are quickly re-constituted; and secondly, substantively, that the US actions in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) are best seen as a compound of revenge, demonstration and opportunism - all of which is intelligible, less than satisfactory (ethically and practically) and as it has been pursued unilaterally clear evidence of the divide between Europe and the USA, which offers the lesson to the Europeans that the ideas of 'the West' or 'the Western alliance' are likely to have to give way to: (i) a concern for the European Union's own interests; and thereafter, (ii) the task of managing their changing relationship with the USA.

Introduction

This paper discusses what happened on 9/11.¹ The overall approach is political-sociological - concerned, broadly, with the social construction of patterns of political understanding which are available thereafter to order and legitimate particular lines of action - in this case what we might call the political, bureaucratic and popular social construction of an enemy. There are two elements - intertwined in the discussion - which can be separated out as both process and resultant stance are social scientifically interesting.²

The formal focus is on the process of the social construction of a pattern of understanding. The discussion is presented through a simple chronology of the steps in the American, European and British responses to the attacks of 9/11. Each step is taken to capture a phase in the process of making sense, schematically: (i) confusion and initial reactions; (ii) preliminary characterisations of the situation and the fleshing out of these positions; and (iii) consolidation, the accumulation of 'confirming instances'³ and the extensive affirmation of a new discourse. A series of simple lessons are drawn: (i) political/military elites need agreed discourses; (ii) the destruction and reconstruction of discourse can be disconcertingly rapid.

In the course of the discussion a substantive position is sketched. The discussion is primarily cast in terms of 'blowback' - 9/11 is read as a reaction to the actions of the USA in the Middle East.⁴ The reactions of the USA are noted, both to the attack, (revenge plus demonstration), and to Europe/NATO (disregard or allow to be faithful supporters). A note on the European responses is made (solidarity plus support through NATO). A related subsidiary note looks at the role of UK/Blair (cheerleader in chief for the USA). A series of simple lessons are drawn: (i) the US has its own interests (an elaborate theoretical apparatus affirms and explicates their overriding priority - realist/liberal international

relations theory); (ii) Europeans have to be clear-eyed about this and their own interests; and (iii) the role of the British Prime Minister is evidence of both a personal lack of judgement and, more disturbingly, the depth of the American colonial-style penetration of the thinking of the British political elite - where there seem to be two key institutional vehicles: the established military alliance (thus NATO/defence linkages); and the machineries of the Bretton Woods settlement (thus the City/finance and the current neo-liberal globalisation ideology) - with the consequence that any clarity and independence of thought will be a real problem for the London political elite.⁵

Reading the sequence of events

C Wright Mills⁶ speaks of the mix of personal interests and public events that sparks the sociological imagination. The events were certainly public, the attack came out of a clear blue sky and I watched on my neighbours TV set, live, drinking tea. An extraordinary experience, almost as though an airport novel had suddenly been translated into day-time TV (the French social theorist Baudrillard spoke of the Gulf War being mediated through global TV screens). The 9/11 attack must have been seen by very many people around the world via the essentially domestic experience of watching TV.

A series of initial observations could be made of the politics.

The US political elite clearly utterly surprised - established parameters of political discourse were clearly radically disturbed - they did not know what to say (George Bush referring to the attackers as 'these folks' and later speaking of 'crusades').

The US military elite (obviously) utterly surprised.

The US government machine utterly surprised.

The US polity was clearly utterly surprised.

The initial reactions of the US elites was precisely, confusion.

We can find comparisons, less fraught examples, which allow us some insight into these elite confusions/reactions; thus the 9/11 confusion can be compared with that of the UK government after 'Black Wednesday'⁷ when the government's economic policy was destroyed by financial market speculation. As the day developed, with the attacks of the value of the currency unceasing, the government did not know what to do. At one point they raised interest rates very sharply and city traders were reported to have laughed. The standard discourse in respect of economic policy had broken down (the finance minister Norman Lamont approached the TV cameras in Downing Street and began by saying - 'it has been a most difficult day') and the sterling pound was ejected from the European exchange rate mechanism (ERM) which had regulated the exchange rates of currencies. The government then invented a new policy stance and built a new discourse around it, and they did this within a couple of days of the financial crisis. It suggests that policy was not grounded in analysis (and thus any claim to fact/reason) but was in significant measure arbitrary or ungrounded⁸ - there had to be

a policy, so one was found. Once the new policy was in place a new discourse rapidly formed - politicians and specialist commentators on TV and in the newspapers began speaking and reporting in the new terms, they did this in all seriousness. It looked like ritual.⁹ The old truth failed, so a new truth was found and the old game of pronouncements (politicians), prognostication (commentators) and action (I assume - bankers etc) continued. The new truth could be re-connected with familiar ways of thinking (ideas within economics, the cognitive preferences of city traders and wider government concerns), but the shift into a new discourse represented a discontinuity in official thinking which was only thereafter elaborated and legitimated (which raises the questions of the extent to which such discourse shifts can be arbitrary or ungrounded - it is clearly necessary to be able to re-connect new discourses to older continuing patterns of thinking/acting - the scope for novelty is thus constrained - by political tradition, institutional inertia/habit (capacity) and the prejudices of key actors).

In the few days after the 9/11 attacks it looked like the US political elite (including the powerful military elite) had to find a new policy and launch a new political discourse. They quickly found one. It has an internal logic - a mix of revenge, demonstration and opportunism - and this logic can be related to wider patterns of US activity in Asia, but it is not clear that this political discourse can sustain critical inspection, that is, there has been a lurch into what looks like an unsustainable position.

(1) The initial confusion can be recalled.

The response took time to develop. There was initial confusion, declarations of support from Europe (and the rest of the world) and a fairly quick identification of the attackers, a rather shadowy group of Middle Eastern terrorists, personalised around their alleged leader Osama bin Laden. There was a short debate about responses - justice (UN involvement plus investigations, leading to trials) versus revenge (military attack on the alleged commanders of the already dead attackers) - and the later was chosen.¹⁰ Overall, the response very quickly became centrally military.

We can comment: (i) the attackers were not shadowy figures from some remote base, rather they were middle class Saudi and Egyptian men who had been living quietly as students in Europe and America (as Irving Kristol pointed out on BBC4) and it is noticeable that they were hardly referred to once the process of reaction had begun; (ii) in terms of the responses, once the military machine cranks into life it is difficult to stop - it is an institution that can only do one job (that is, deploying force, or as Max Weber had it the use of 'legitimate violence' or more simply killing people); and (iii) the alternate response of learning the lessons of the attack - asking why and what might rationally be done - was never mentioned.¹¹

(2) The preliminary identification was made and action begun.

A target was found. The target was developed over the space of a few days - it began with one element and then others were added. It was a compound target comprising a series of elements: (i) Osama bin

Laden; (ii) al Qaeda; and (iii) the Taliban government of Afghanistan. All three were lumped together. The differences between them were elided as the process of the construction of an enemy ran its course.

On this basis a series of actions began: (i) the identification of bin Laden as the responsible figure; (ii) attacks on alleged al Qaeda bases/personnel in Afghanistan; (iii) attacks on the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Also a range of security measures in America, Europe and elsewhere were begun - including upgrading airport passenger security checks, identifying suspected supporters and tracking suspect flows of money and freezing accounts.

We can comment: (i) the characterisation of bin Laden as the leader is rather contradicted by his reported behaviour - he denied all knowledge of the attack and fled his home - one assumes that with prior knowledge he would not have been sitting at home with his family when the planes struck (and the issue opened up here is the nature of al Qaeda - hierarchical, loose network or an idea;¹² (ii) al Qaeda was presented as an organised terrorist group - it was implied that they were an hierarchically organised group - an alternative position was that it was a loose network of Islamist dissidents - they seem to be present in many Middle Eastern countries¹³ - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and so on (however, this view was not affirmed as it would have made the attack on bin Laden and Afghanistan evidently irrelevant) - a final more radical alternative was that al Qaeda was more of an idea than anything else; (iii) it was noticeable that there was no proof that any of these elements were involved - the attackers were middle class Saudi and Egyptian men based in Germany and Florida; (iv) it was noticeable that the US presentation of its actions altered as they went along - as the attacks on Afghanistan began the US advertised surgical operations to catch the leaders, and as these failed opted instead for the role of Northern Alliance airforce (B52s carpet bombing Taliban front line positions) - that is, the US joins in a long running tribal based civil war - a second US trashing of Afghanistan ('re-arranging the rubble' as Arundathi Roy put it¹⁴) - one of the richest countries in the world goes to war against one of the poorest - the Taliban collapse in a few weeks, unsurprisingly, notwithstanding some dire predictions. The US and other forces are then deployed on the ground in a confused situation, including inter-ethnic violence and foreign violence. A puppet leader is found and installed, foreign troops back him and the internal civil war is semi-suspended; (v) here were shifting stories - how these exercises was read into new discourse - the precise objective of capturing bin Laden was forgotten and the objective was retrospectively rewritten, now as overthrowing the Taliban, so victory is declared (but what victory, the USA has participated in a civil war); and (vi) the wider consequences were not considered - centrally to reinforce hostility to the USA, which it seems runs through much of the Arab Middle East - their support for Israel, their presence in Saudi Arabia and their wider role as outside exploiters and supporters of local unsavoury regimes.

(3) The process of the consolidation of the new discourse moved ahead.

The response to 9/11 develops over the space of a few days - the construction of a new discourse and related policy - what we have announced as 'the war against terrorism'. Bush also announces that those

who are not explicit supporters will be considered potential problems. Bush announces the existence of 'the axis of evil'. Political elites and commentators begin to work with reference to this discourse.

Given its evident irrationality we can ask further questions, in particular is this new discourse entirely vacuous or is there a deeper logic to US behaviour (maybe only slowly developing as the new discourse is re-connected with established patterns of thinking). In the present case, it seems to me, what we find is a mixture of revenge (as political/military elite vent their anger and that of their population), demonstration (to counteract the impact of images of New York under attack there has to be a show of force - this is a matter of rebuilding cultural capital - political and security - one could say, someone had to be killed (it turned out to be Afghans) - and opportunism, the moves into Central Asia (military geo-strategy and commercial geo-economic).

At this point, we might also note that the process of the social construction of an enemy requires (amongst other things) the identification of relevant audiences - the audiences for whom the new truth is being made. In the first place, the US political/military elites and the general population (revenge, and the reestablishment of an acceptable sense of collective self). In the second place, the rest of the world, all those who had watched unfolding events on their TV sets (demonstration, the rebuilding of destroyed US cultural capital). Both these aspects are backward looking, they contain the immediate effects of the collapse of the familiar discourse, but there is another core aspect which is prospective - it looks to the future - not to the work of the discourse in containing collapse but to its role in opening new possibilities. In this third case (opportunism), the possibilities opened up by immediate moves - again with elite/popular audiences - the geo-strategic and geo-economic movement into oil rich Central Asia.

We can comment: (i) in all this developing response one element is neglected - there seems to be no reflection on why the attack was made - calling attackers 'terrorists' is an excuse not to think, it is not a move in a rational analysis; (ii) nor is it plausible policy - terrorism is merely a military technique - how can it be possible to go to war against a technique?; and (iii) if there is a logic to this sort - revenge etceteras - if this is how the new discourse is re-connected with longer patterns of thinking - then we might note that it is certainly not new as the US has been deeply involved in East and West Asia ever since the end of the Second World War (and their involvement predated that war, but was pursued in the context of their being other significant imperial European powers) and in the years following the capture of Saipan island the US has deployed military force against Asian targets (military and civilian) on several occasions.¹⁵

European reactions

The European response can be noted: (i) NATO and elite EU levels (that is, the level of formal supra-national bodies); (ii) France and Germany (that is, the key national players within the European Union); and (iii) the UK.

>NATO meets a few days after 9/11 and invokes treaty commitments to aid the USA - a strong response - more than a declaration of sympathy/concern - however, the USA does not use NATO

machinery, preferring to work unilaterally with selected allies (opening up a debate about the nature/utility of NATO - summed in terms of the slogan 'NATO is dead').

> European Union - expresses solidarity.

> Debate in France - expresses solidarity.

> Debate in Germany - expresses solidarity.

> Debate in the UK - expresses rather more than solidarity.

We can comment: (i) the European experience of terrorist violence is extensive (UK, France, Italy, Spain and Germany) - so political elites and populations know how to deal with such attacks/campaigns (the political side) and systems of security are in place (the technical side); (ii) expressions of sympathy and support from European elites and institutions were to be expected (both as a general reaction and in particular context of the post-Second World War involvement of the USA in Europe); (iii) a move to work with USA on reviewing and upgrading technical measures was to be expected (stopping jet liners flying into office blocks is a common concern for all states¹⁶); (iv) thereafter it is noticeable that Europeans looked to consider the causes of the attacks - thus European political elites rapidly distances themselves from Bush's 'war on terrorism' - there was also widespread public debate in the media - taking the line that unless and until the reasons for the attacks were known it would not be possible to formulate long term plans.

Further thoughts - from a UK perspective

It is not difficult to understand American desire for revenge. The political and military elite were made to look foolish (reactions of a discomfited political/military elite). It is possible to see the logic of demonstration - killing someone in order to restore US credibility (even if learning the lessons would have been better, but such a course of action was presumably beyond the politicians). It is not difficult to understand EU countries (and others) offering diplomatic sympathy (and even modest support, such as upgrading security, regulating money movements etceteras). However, it is difficult to understand why Prime Minister Blair embraced the role of US spokesman/poodle.

Blair's response has been emotional (acting without thinking), ill-informed (no apparent thought about the causes, or the consequences of US actions) and impolitic as it was not a UK problem, the attack was not, as Blair had it, on the West or 'civilisation', it was quite precisely on the USA¹⁷ and for the UK this rationally implies distancing from US foreign policy and upgrading UK/European security and defence.

In respect of Blair's actions, there are clearly a series of problems: (i) dragging the EU nations into a military role (subservient to US characterisations of issues); (ii) neglecting the domestic scene - another Blair war - the governments domestic record is poor - last election they garnered one quarter of

the available votes on the lowest turnout ever - poor record increasingly noted - Europe remains the key unaddressed issue - war/international scene remains, as ever, a good distraction; and (iii) mystery as to what he thinks he is up to - UK military link with the USA is strong - it is an available institutional sphere of action - it recreates the number one ally in Europe role (lost when cold war ended) - so institutional competence/atavism and political nostalgia/opportunism - we can note that an early excuse for Blair was that of 'moderating US behaviour' - subsequently the UK went along with joining in a civil war - collapsing Afghanistan (with all that implies for the civilian population) and providing an army for US puppet.

Six months on, further thoughts

BBC4 (11/03/02) screens an half hour documentary on 9/11 which was even handed, more or less (even if the political right had more voice/time). It is the only BBC treatment of this kind that I can remember. In routine official public sphere Blair and his government continue to be US poodles. The discourse of 'the war against terrorism' continues, albeit with interruptions (first, Israel/Palestine (the idea that 9/11 action in Afghanistan would require US sorting out its client - Israel - is shown to be wrong) and latterly the prospect of war between Pakistan and India) and the talk of the axis of evil has moved on to encompass talk of Gulf War II. In other words, little sign of reason coming into fashion amongst American and British political/military elites.

The US attacks on Afghanistan does look like revenge (on a poor country with no proved connections to the attack, and there are no proved connections of bin Laden to the attack (save for selective quotations fed to the media (risibly feeble) and the taped confession fortuitously discovered in an abandoned cave (rhetorically, the Zinoviev Video)). The more general activities of the US (Colombia or Philippines, for example) look like attempts by political/military bureaucracy to re-establish credibility.

It might be said that whilst the behaviour of the US political/military elite is intelligible, it is also juvenile and stupid (better to learn the lessons and better not to recruit more to ranks of enemies - recall the activities of the British political elite and the rise of the Provisional IRA). The behaviour of the European Union has been weak (unsurprisingly). The behaviour of Blair - conjoined intellectual and moral vacuity - is simply extraordinary - it reveals the depth of US colonisation/villagers illusion (interestingly Blair is now routinely criticised in the UK press - empty of ideas, lousy on performance, his party supine and their support in the country wide but shallow).

As regards my own reactions, to the attack, after Chalmers Johnson, the attack was 'blowback'. In the context of US behaviour in East and West Asia post-Saipan,¹⁸ 9/11 was a brutal taste of their own medicine and bombing Afghanistan is simply killing more Asians. More general reactions: dismay at sight of US empire project (or aspirant empire - as the US has conventional military pre-eminence, but not economic, financial or cultural); dismay that it still exists despite all the talk about tripolarity; dismay that it operates so crudely; dismay (but not surprise) at the overall weakness of the European

responses); and acute dismay at the sight of the British political elite falling into line, evidence of US influence and the depth of the British political elite's illusions. And in answer to question what else could US have done, the answer is that the US elite could have opted for UN plus diplomacy plus justice (rather than revenge), that is, played it long. As it happens the war on Afghanistan turned out to be short, this is good news - fewer dead Afghans.

So, what, finally, are the lessons?

Official discourses

Formally, that official discourses are fragile. They can be abruptly undermined. They can equally rapidly be remade. It seems that it is necessary for there to be 'official truths' within political communities.

In respect of the particular matter of 'making enemies', it is a strategy available to a political elite. In the USA the military elite are very powerful (Chalmers Johnson's point). They are an available institution - once set in motion, they inevitably express their own institutional logic (what else could they do?). The public PR side is equally familiar: dehumanisation of the enemy; personalization of the enemy (a nod to the mass media); misdirection of public attention (away from causes/consequences); and the repetitive presentation of a single overarching official truth ('war against terrorism').

The extent of the arbitrariness of the reconstruction of official discourse is open to question. At the limit it must be bound by overall received political cultural tradition, then the ideologies of the particular elite, but thereafter it seems unexpectedly open. The case of Black Wednesday was most revealing, after the fiasco it was clear that there had to be an official discourse, so one was found and all rallied to the new discourse as if nothing much had happened. In a similar way the construction of an enemy in the wake of 9/11 has replaced the old discourse (USA as secure model for all) with a new one (USA as key player in the global 'war against terrorism').

Substantively

Substantively, over longer term, for Europeans:

(i) 9/11 reveals that their long term ally/leader/occupier is (a) a target for Islamists, as a result of its activities in the Middle East; (b) not evidently concerned to think about these matters; (c) contemptuous of the Europeans ('NATO is dead'); and (d) that the British political elite are disposed to act like (or in significant measure, are) colonial subjects of the USA;

(ii) 9/11 reveals that thinking in terms of 'the West' or 'the Western alliance' is self-deluding;

(iii) 9/11 reveals the problem of managing their changing relationship with America¹⁹;

(iv) all of which underscores the necessity for a more integrated European Union, that is, continuing movement towards political integration (where this includes a clear coherent foreign and defence policy/identity).

Substantively, in respect of the UK political elite:

(i) for the UK political elite - the immediate problem remains - how can they handle the demands of Europe whilst maintaining their subservience to Washington; and

(ii) for UK analysts, the issue of mapping the depth of US political-cultural penetration of the 'Whitehall-Westminster village'.

¹ At the risk of stating the obvious, this piece is not an apologia for anti-American violence or anti-Americanism more broadly, it is, rather, a restricted piece of scholarship - the concern is with ways of understanding and the manufacture of official truths - which looks at the prospective new discourse of the 'war on terrorism' and notes a few rather obvious lessons for Europeans.

² The process of the construction of an enemy and the resultant stance were evident for all to see in the first few days after the attack - but there is no attempt made here to reconstruct the inside detail of the process, or the subsequently routinely ordered activities of the political/military elites.

³ The expression comes from Karl Popper - he criticised the un-scientific nature of postivistic Marxisms and Freudianism in terms of their propensity to affirm an overarching explanation which they then buttressed by finding confirming instances all over the place - he contrasts this with the risky specific falsifiable claims of natural science - of course, his view of social science is finally unacceptable but his jibe does have some force here (and elsewhere).

⁴ I take the expression from Chalmers Johnson (C Johnson 2000 *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, London, Little Brown - I was reading the book when the 9/11 attack was made - the book discusses what the author takes to be the inevitable reaction to US empire aspirations - the book refers in passing to US involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan and makes the point that anti-American violence had a root in political opposition to that role

⁵ This opens up a related issue - the depth of US penetration of other European capitals - NATO and Bretton Woods machinery are not restricted to UK

⁶ See C Wright Mills 1970 *The Sociological Imagination*, Harmondsworth, Penguin

⁷ One of the UK's regular financial crises, which took place in autumn 1992 - this overtook Prime Minister John Major and his finance minister Norman Lamont - the hedge funds attacked the UK currency and the government was unable to support it, resulting in its abrupt exit from the European Exchange Mechanism only a couple of years after joining. Popular legend has it that George Soros made some five billion pounds.

⁸ This is clearly a problem for positivist minded social scientists, one thinks of orthodox economics, whereas for 'social constructivists' it is interesting - an example of sense being made

⁹ One can recall the anthropologist A P Cohen writing about formal truths - truths which everyone acknowledges - whether or not they happen to be actually true - because by acknowledging them social life is ordered (A P Cohen 1994 *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, London, Routledge)

¹⁰ An attack on a major city must be a casus belli - but when the attacker is unclear?

¹¹ There has been much subsequent debate - from George Bush - 'They hate our freedoms ... ' etc through to Gore Vidal - a response to empire (G Vidal 2001 *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How we got to be so hated*)

¹² My comment here only works as an argument against the characterisation of al Qaeda as an hierarchical organisation. One might also ask about responsibility - how direct does a connection have to be?

¹³ Commentators have suggested that authoritarian regimes - allies of the West in many cases - have looked to legitimate their rule by funding Islamic groups - the base of radical Islamist activities - in particular in Pakistan where the local army intelligence services helped to establish the Taliban

¹⁴ See A Roy 2001 *Power Politics* Second Edition, Cambridge Mass, Southend Press

¹⁵ On this generally see Bruce Cummings 1999 *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century*, Duke University Press, chapter two

¹⁶ A piece in the *Economist*, sourced in Washington, made this the key to European acquiescence/support, but I think this is wrong as collaboration on necessary security measures does not entail buying the Washington revenge, demonstration and opportunism package

¹⁷ An opinion survey cited in the *Economist* (May 25 2002) showed Britain with just over 20% population seeing 9/11 as an attack on the West whilst just over 50% saw it as an attack on the USA - the extent to which it was read as an attack on the West was lower in all the other cited European countries.

¹⁸ Arundathi Roy listed some of the wars the US has engaged in - p.128

¹⁹ At this point much more could be said - it seems to me that one aspect of the relationship of the EU and USA in the years since 1989/91 is the historical process of the recovery of European independence - that is, the emergence of the war-damaged polities from the long period of US occupation/leadership (all vehicled through the now redundant political cultural project of 'the free west') - it would be surprising if this process were not awkward.