Grief work in a war economy

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The World Trade Center site has become, says a psychologist who has volunteered to counsel workers there, a ‘sacred burial ground’. But as a focus for community memory and regeneration, a ritualized space, and an assertion of the religious character of American social life, the site is disturbingly banal. The hoardings that surround those devastated city blocks are strung with fading commemorations, team posters and autographed jackets from union locals, stuffed animals and fake flowers. The elegiac tokens represent the grief of disparate communities, attaching itself to a specific site of loss. They also express that desire for revenge which Francis Bacon called ‘a kinde of Wilde Justice’ which puts the law ‘out of Office’, and which the USA has begun to satisfy from the illegal cells of Guantánamo Bay. The insignia of mourning reassert the will of local populations in national action. They also advertise forms of belonging undamaged by attacks on American targets – and, by extension, a heightened awareness of national belonging. Visitors take their experience home as photographs and videotapes; they get a better angle by clambering on steps and parked cars to look over the barriers, or wait in line to ascend the newly erected viewing platforms. I have only ever seen as much public weeping at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. The route to Ground Zero from City Hall leads down a stretch of Broadway renamed ‘the Canyon of Heroes’, a tribute to chasmic spaces of capital filled with the ghosts of dutiful sacrifice. Banners on lampposts remind New Yorkers to ‘do your part: spend money’, either on the T-shirts airbrushed with presidential soundbites and exploding logos, ‘Wipe Out Bin Laden’ toilet paper and other memorabilia flogged at Ground Zero, or on the limitless luxuries that absorb Manhattan’s ragged economic energy for undamaged miles north of Battery Park. That this grief should take both emotional and consumerist forms is not a contradiction, but a self-validating premiss of national identity.

In considering how grief has been used tactically to assert the US military agenda, my aim is not to evaluate the ‘sincerity’ of expressions of grief, or to condemn them as naive, mercenary or conniving; but grief, far from being a spontaneous and private outpouring, is a socialized response whose power in galvanizing populations has long been recognized. The placards and condolences at the WTC mostly express the senders’ nationalist pride, and their desire to maintain accustomed forms of living and thinking threatened by September’s attacks. This conservative tendency is not unusual for mortuary ritual, which tends to smooth the disruptions to social hierarchy caused by death. Mortuary rituals in hierarchical societies emphasize the loss not of an individual but of a social agent; that vacated agency is filled, during the ritual, by the heir. The funeral audience become participants, really or by proxy, in a social ritual whose chief roles are reserved for the kinship group or a particular stratum of social leadership. But their participation also asserts their claims to the dead. In this way, the ritual combines inclusion and exclusion, the breakdown of hierarchy and its maintenance. For participants it can be palliative, releasing not only the sorrow of loss but also the...
tensions which build up within systems of hereditary power. When the ritual is forgone, or the community is excluded from it, unexpressed grief can emerge in other, more revolutionary expressions which tend to undermine the smooth transition of power. But even in the most orthodox performances, funerary rites bring private emotional states into contact with the law, the government, the church, and community discipline, and can thus offer radical opportunities for reimagining and changing social life.

Ground Zero to Ground Hero
Even the commemoration of private individuality in contemporary Western funerals seeks out exemplary characteristics on which a communal ethic and culture can be modelled. In his State of the Union address, George Bush claimed that

in the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self.2

J.-P. Vernant has argued that in archaic Greece, ‘the social memory’ used the emblematic hero ‘to root a whole system of values in the absolute, in order to preserve it from precariousness, instability and destruction: in short, to shelter it from time and from death’. Existing ‘within the public domain’, the Greek hero was an embodiment of the values of the ‘common culture’. Similarly, the elevation of NYPD and Fire Department officers to heroic status in the corporate-sponsored epideictic which now blankets the American airwaves anchors their accidental deaths in the values of donation and brotherhood; the brave performance of official duty becomes a tribute to the absolute of the service economy.

Against such reasserted cultural values, Bush dismissed the rival values of secularism and consumerism, which, he claimed, the terrorists believed had exceeded all other forms of civic duty for Americans. ‘Our enemies believed America was weak and materialistic, that we would splinter in fear and selfishness. They were as wrong as they are evil’, he asserted.

None of us would ever wish the evil that was done on September the 11th. Yet after America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do.

September 11 is given as a national day of reckoning, the apocalyptic rending of the veil of materialism. The millenarians among Bush’s evangelical cabinet will have been satisfied by commentators around the world describing this as a unique historical moment. The NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council acknowledged that ‘while Allies and Russia have suffered from terrorist attacks against civilians, the horrific scale of the attacks of 11 September is without precedent in modern history’.3 But it is clearly not numerically unprecedented. Rather, this exception seems almost a compound of the uniqueness of the victims Americans (mostly urban, mostly white and middle to upper class). David Dolan, a Zionist journalist, compared the attack on America to previous attacks on Israel. ‘But for all the terrorist casualties we have suffered in the past year, and indeed in the decades before, nothing even remotely compares to what the United States has just experienced. If our Sunday was black, then America’s Tuesday was a black hole.’

On the event horizon of that black hole, time collapses; history begins anew. But the recommencing of history on September 11, a date which itself has achieved symbolic sacredness through metonymy, is not an imitation of the revolutionary impulse of the Jacobin calendar. Rather, it provides an exact moment (a deadline) for the revision of consciousness; it is suggested that this date, baptism by fire, reoriented US intellection
about the world and its own history and responsibilities. But, crucially, America has (Bush observed in his State of the Union address) ‘come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed’. The new world is governed by infallible and axiomatic principles – to question them is to dishonour the dead. So as the towers of Babel crumbled, a unanimity of language was sought and enforced. This repression of dissent was not only the preoccupation of far-right organizations, but of putatively leftist poets and academics. It was enforced through insult, threat and reduction to speechless symbolism, and through repressive models of grief provided by the organs of bourgeois spiritual ‘wellbeing’.

In an essay published on Poetics (a listserv maintained by SUNY Buffalo) on September 18, noted American poet Ron Silliman describes this time as ‘the worst possible moment in history’ for leftist isolation – that is, dissent. Without strategic complicity at the nadir of human history, he argued, the Left will consign itself to an ineffectual banishment and lose its ‘credibility’. The claim is that grief, as an absolute and inalienable political right, must not be subverted by ideological discussions. Silliman continues,

To take any position that can be perceived as inaction in the face of the enormous physical and emotional wound that confronts the American people serves only to exacerbate the reputation of the left as a movement completely out of touch with reality.

The wounded body politic answers its violation with force: such sentiments, ‘natural’ to the individual, are seen as sufficient justifications for the state. Grief allows the state apparatus and its particular interests to be replaced by a populace united in feeling: a sensible Leviathan responding instinctively to pain. For Silliman, grief recuperates even the nationalist symbols vitiated since Vietnam: ‘the flag’s role this time around has been one of solidarity, an emblem not of the state but of the people’.

The run on flags and patriotic insignia has been heralded by some as a symbol of resurgent community identification and political consciousness. It is not. The ceaseless invocation of public opinion, as a natural rather than a manufactured index of desire, is just another mechanism for enforcing conformity. Nationalism becomes compulsory through recourse to polled and prodded public opinion, which exemplifies the false logic of individual democratic activity. Adorno describes nationalism as ‘the characteristic form of absurd opinion today’. Nationalism provides an outlet for the individual narcissism repressed in private life. The remedy for collective narcissism is not merely the overcoming of those disappointments and privations that afflict the individual in everyday life, but critical thought. And yet critical thought is being deliberately shoved out of public life, while narcissism is served by television. Ordinary Americans could record their Christmas goodwill message to the troops at any Circuit City, and it might be broadcast on a major network or over Times Square – while the military will have a prime-time infomercial of its own next season in Jerry Bruckheimer’s newest brain-child, Profiles from the Front Line, a reality television co-production of Disney and the Pentagon.
Dissent has undeniably been suppressed in the name of solidarity from the right and such putative leftists as Silliman. Peter Beinart, editor in chief of the *New Republic* wrote, ‘This nation is now at war. And in such an environment, domestic political dissent is immoral without a prior statement of national solidarity, a choosing of sides.’

The media demand uniform responses to grief – that is, ideological complicity – as a sign of morality. On September 19, the conservative Internet journal *FrontPage Magazine.com* called Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s vote against congressional emergency anti-terrorist measures traitorous.

We are at war again, and it’s time to call things by their right names. Barbara Lee is not an anti-war activist, she is an anti-American communist who supports America’s enemies and has actively collaborated with them in their war against America.4

This dogmatism reached its apogee in Michael Kelly’s article ‘Pacifist Claptrap’ for the *Washington Post* on September 26. He argued, ‘in the situation where one’s nation has been attacked … pacifism is, inescapably and profoundly, immoral. Indeed, … pacifism is on the side of the murderers, and it is on the side of letting them murder again.’

This attitude – equating pacifism, willingness to debate non-military responses, intellectual work with appeasement and finally murder – was invoked by Marjorie Perloff in a controversial letter to the *London Review of Books* (18 October 2001). Perloff disagreed with an earlier essay by Mary Beard, comparing her first to Chamberlain and then claiming her unpopular opinion might be one reason

why academics are now so poorly regarded by the rest of the population and why there are so few academic jobs for recent Humanities PhDs, either in the US or the UK. Outside the ivory gates, 95 per cent of the US population evidently disagree with Beard’s assessment.

Her letter is part of the battle to censor dissent, especially on American campuses. Appeals to statistics, polls and an absolute public consensus prove the perverse and alienated nature of academic thinking. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, founded by Lynne Cheney and Joe Lieberman, itemized 117 ‘unpatriotic’ responses to the terrorist attacks by university faculty and students.5 Meanwhile, the Institute for American Values countered such deviance with its own ‘Letter from America’, endorsed by the nation’s leading just war theorists and signed by ‘sixty prominent US academics.’ The letter argues in aggressively theological (Christian) terms and in the name of universal human morality that ‘There are times when waging war is not only morally permitted, but morally necessary, as a response to calamitous acts of violence, hatred, and injustice. This is one of those times.’6

The refusal of many Americans to open themselves to new forms of knowing, to ask ‘why’ rather than ‘how’, is lauded as a combative and indeed patriotic response to a tyrannical and exterior will. *FrontPageMagazine.com* warned

THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM WILL BE WON, or lost, between your ears. Your mind is the target. Your mind is the battlefield. Horror is the weapon, and terror the intended result. If, as President George W. Bush says, we are horrified but not terrified, then the terrorists will lose. Defeat or victory is therefore ultimately under your control, nobody else’s.

Resistance to terrorism as ideological warfare is one way Americans can contribute to the new culture of responsibility. This advice was also promulgated by the most powerful organ of middle-class consumer propaganda: Oprah. On a show aired shortly after the September 11 bombings, Oprah asked resident counsellor Dr Phil McGraw for advice on emotional health. He outlined his thoughts on her website later. Under the category ‘Psychological and Physical Effects’, he writes,

The intent of terrorism goes beyond destruction. On a larger psychological level, the idea is to disrupt our day-to-day lives. Terrorists aim to disturb how we live, to frighten us and to challenge what we think about our world. Our personal challenge is to not give in to any of
that. Keep being who you are and doing what you normally do. Don’t let these attacks allow you to become overly reclusive or paranoid. Each and every one of us is fighting a battle of wills. We have to say, ‘I will not succumb.’ It isn’t easy to work through these difficult feelings. You don’t have to like it, you just have to do it.

The response which Gillian Rose says is demanded by fascist representation – experience without transformation, the untouched self-defences of the intact subject – is transformed into a repulsion of the terrorists’ objectives. The patriot is compelled into an emotional and pious fortitude. The refusal to think is meaningful.

**Feeling alone**

Even apathy, lamented after the most recent British general election and seen as a root cause of the electoral crisis in the US last November, has been squeezed out by nearly compulsive displays of nationalism. At a Philly Flyers ice hockey match on September 20, fans requested that the game be suspended so that they could watch the president’s address to Congress. This kind of political consumption is not surprising, for it is sentimental. American politics can only be broadcast as sentiment. That a political culture based on sentimentality should invoke a wholly sentimental (irrational) response to a catastrophe is to be expected. Perhaps Silliman should not have been so amazed to see ‘one hundred or so American males openly cry on television over the past week (and even Bush barely kept it together when a reporter in the Oval Office asked him about his feelings).’

Grief and other emotions are (if anything) overarticulated and indulged on the box. The soft-focus morning interventions for housewives, the ‘spirit’ sections in Borders bookstore, the ‘Awareness Movement’ have raised an army of consumers of emotional health. Perhaps their newly purchased ability to articulate conflicting feelings could lead viewers and consumers closer to criticism of their government. Catherine Lutz describes emotions from her anthropological research on contemporary American subjects this way: emotions, when defined as interior to the individual, provide an important symbolic vehicle by which the problem of maintenance of the social order can be voiced. A highly articulated emotional life tells us that we exist. It legitimates our experience as meaningful, even as it enforces the borders between us and others. The obsession with ‘closure’ in my country, often satirized as self-indulgent feebleness disguised as a pop-psych cliché, seeks those rituals of communal commemoration which are now outmoded. Closure is the ending that Weber says is missing from the story of progress which would give meaning to life by death. But consumers are advised that closure is found, instead, in the symbolic exchanges between the damaged ego and the superego in private, or especially in the domestic sphere. ‘Closure’ enables the suppression of dissent and the restoration of a producer to the marketplace, without confronting the causes and social consequences of grief – as if the processes of loss, mourning and resolution are useful only in so far as they manufacture a resting individual as surplus value. The healthy one is ‘closed’. Closure is, above all, a feature of narratives rather than real experience.

But suffering provides an opportunity for self-reflection which, it turns out, is actually surveillance – watching one’s neighbour as oneself. What the good America is ready to do for itself includes Bush’s plan for a volunteer USA Freedom Corps, which will embrace Operation TIPS (Terrorist Information and Prevention System), enabling ‘millions of America transportation workers, postal workers, and public utility employees to identify and report suspicious activities linked to terrorism and crime’; and encompass plans to double the number of neighbourhood watch programmes in the next two years, ‘incorporating terrorism prevention into its mission’. One of the proofs of goodness is transparency. As the USA Patriot Act demonstrated, along with patriotism comes willing submission to surveillance and the surrender of civil liberties.
The extreme version of this surveillance has already raised international hackles. The manacles, opaque goggles, earmuffs, and face masks strapped to prisoners transported to Guantánamo Bay render them incapable of expression or communication. At the same time, their sensory deprivation reasserts US sovereignty, preventing the prisoners from scrutinizing their captors or surroundings, while allowing the military guards and the media an invasive look at their prey, to penetrate even into the reserved and mysterious interiority of their bodies: Camp X-Ray indeed.

If a shoddy discourse of the emotions reinforces the boundaries of the subject, then emotional politics reinforces national boundaries. Displays of rectitude – from the propagandistic dumping of 37,500 rations of Pop Tarts in the desert to Bush's invitation to every American schoolchild to donate $1 to the American Fund for Afghan Children – may convince us of our own unshaken goodness. But they are not indications of political awareness expanding to recognize the needs and humanity of others. These emotional histrionics are a part of the conservative, public mortuary ritual. This ritual is sanctified by religion and a symbolic apparatus of flags, pins, and physical disciplines. It uses emblematic individuals as absolute guarantees of shared cultural values. It consolidates state power against the damage to its institutional representatives (and thus its own sovereign potential) by death. It enforces a collective experience of grief. Behind Bush stands the resolve of a suddenly confluent American identity. The LA Times observed that 'Nationwide, people swarm blood banks, eager to have their own blood flow into the veins of those wounded by an unknown enemy.' The body politic is reconstituted by loss; the desire for continuity, formerly served by the state funeral, is satisfied through rituals of selective donation (personal, physical loss or sacrificial blood) and uniformity (of thought, or resolve).

Grief is never an unmediated feeling. But neither is it just a plodding through conventions, a rhetorical performance. If mortuary ritual is a communication system which uses symbols to convey information, it is subject to noise. Grief can be subversive. Ritual mourning confirms the bonds within a community; it can also vent dissent and fears of exclusion or change.

Grief is impure, neither wholly personal nor wholly rhetorical. It is useful. Historically, it has initiated (in Gail Holst-Warhaft’s words) ‘uncontrolled sequences of reciprocal violence’. Since the terrorist attacks, it has provided an absolute mandate for unlimited and indiscrte revenge killing of Afghani civilians – already, in many estimates, exceeding the total lost on September 11. But if grief is also one of the ‘pre-cultural’ emotions, a biological imperative; it cannot be excluded from the emotional drives which structure social bonding. We must therefore find a way to use it, to subvert the official grief which is our induction into militarist aggression and justifies the largest military spending increase in two decades, with the grief that impels collective action and renews commitment to human liberation. To do so, we must recognize that grief can be as tactical as dying.

Notes
2. For a transcript, see www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129–11.html
3. www.nato.int/docu/pr/2001/p010913e.htm
4. For Silliman's post and reactions to it, see http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind0109 &L=poetics. For other examples of instances where dissent, or even slight criticisms by the major network, has been labelled treasonous, see 'Actually, They DO Dare Call It Treason' by Terry Krepel. http://conwebwatch.tripod.com/stories/2001/treason.html
6. See www.propositionsonline.com/Fighting_For/fighting_for.html