

# Catastrophe as a way of life

an anti-imperialism for the twenty-first century

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2002

## 1. Burn your bibles, not your neighbors

Now that a significant number of both patricians and plebes of the American metropole, from wealthy futures traders to dishwashers, have become collateral damage in the crossfire between Jihad and McWorld, it bears asking ourselves what forces are really clashing and what is at stake.

The gruesome obliteration of the World Trade Center and four airliners on September 11, 2001 was a crime against humanity of stunning proportions. The small cadre of men who carried out the suicide-annihilation of several thousand people, inflicting grave physical and emotional injury on many more, were, simply, monsters. Whatever one's political persuasion, one can only applaud the passengers on United Airlines flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania that day, who, apparently refusing to be reduced to instruments of someone else's mad scheme, struggled to take control of the plane to save themselves, and strangers, from being massacred.

As for the Pentagon, the attack was equally ruthless, the manner of attack reprehensible and inhuman. Nevertheless, common sense should tell us that it was a military target, the headquarters of an ongoing, if mostly undeclared, global war to maintain the economic supremacy of American corporate elites, a war that has claimed millions of innocent lives in places like Vietnam, Central America and Iraq, to name just a few (including sacrificing the lives of tens of thousands of mostly American proletarian soldiers), while providing a comfortable living to the upper echelons of the centurion class that administers it. From the perspective of the vast and unfeeling operations of "infinite justice," to borrow the arrogant and dimwitted phrase of the military bureaucrats, the smoking fissure in the Pentagon wall provides a narrow glimpse into the ever-turning wheel of fortune that encompasses both dishing destiny out and taking it.

The portentous media allocutions notwithstanding, the present gotterdammerung between bin Laden's loosely knit Islamic fascist international and the military coalition of the hegemons (whatever new name the publicists of bin Bush and Ayatollah Ashcroft have given it this season) is not quite a clash between "civilizations" or cultures, between a "West" of reason, democracy and modernity on the one hand, and an irrational, terrorist, Islamic "East" on the other.

As Edward Said has wisely noted, such images—images, we should add, shared palindromically as it were by self-professed "Western" crusaders and "Eastern" jihadi alike—"have little time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagoguery and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization." Instead of calling up such self-serving, one-dimensional abstractions, it is far more meaningful, Said advises, "to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities." [1]

In reality, Said notes, history is made up not only of "wars of religion and imperial conquest but also...exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing." Indeed, there would be no recognizable "West" of putative humanism, science and

enlightenment without Islam, through which “Europe” discovered richly elaborated traditions back to a classical antiquity it came to claim as its own. “Islam is inside from the start.” [2]

Furthermore, the Islamic fundamentalists presently at war with the empire are a puritanical and militaristic cult that, like all fundamentalist movements, can only exist by extirpating most of the rich, exquisite legacy of the culture from which they depressingly derive—the scholarship, ecstatic mysticism, music, dance, poetry and art that make Islam both unique and kin to, in fact woven into, the whole fabric of human spiritual expression. Things being both empty and full, this is why sufism, taoism, zen and other spiritual insights all return to the same seed.

Whenever they can, all religious totalitarians suppress life and song, dance and poetry, more violently than any secularism. [3]

While Islamic fundamentalism cannot be explained away merely as a reaction to the predatory brutality of the capitalist West, it clearly mutated from the eddies and backwaters of imperial history as a revenge on European colonialism, Western capitalism and soviet state socialism. [4] The consummate Evil Other is the crystallization of the dominant empire’s bad faith, the monsters inhabiting its restless dreams. The present Operation Endless War is not so much a clash of civilizations as an epic gang fight between the preeminent rogue state and the preeminent stateless rogues, between the empire and its shadow spawn.

More specifically, it is well known that many of the operatives leading this ambitious and obscurantist rival totalitarianism, including the turbaned bogeyman himself, were assembled, trained and financed by the United States in a previous crusade against a rival empire; Afghani mujahedin were even feted in the White House, where the self-proclaimed contra, President Ronald Reagan, deemed them “the moral equivalent of [the US] founding fathers.” New such moral equivalents, recycled and refinanced, have now been marshaled to do battle; many are relics of the last avatar, fighters who have switched sides and switched sides again, warlords of a sacrifice zone reduced to ceaseless war.

Ceaseless cockroach wars, largely decentralized and inchoate, endless ethno-religious strife, and jihads against and sometimes in alliance with the “McWorld” of global capitalist monoculture and techno-military neoliberalism: is that not a major pattern in the emerging epoch? As Benjamin Barber argues in his *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), the contending forces do not simply conflict, but converge and reinforce one another. Whether in the mighty metropole, ever-expanding its power and scope to invade every last corner of life, or in the squalid principalities grubbing out their existence in the periphery, selling diamonds, slaves, arms and drugs to finance their aggressions and their pleasures, the kleptocratic state reigns supreme.

And war is its health. That is the crossfire from which most of us, generally well disposed to honor local culture and self-reliance along with an inevitably multicultural global interdependence, apparently will have to take cover.

The “great religions” are mixed phenomena, encompassing deep insights into the mystery of being human, and therefore conscious, in a sense both inside and outside of (our) nature. One can be godless and yet appreciate the wisdom in these traditions. On the other hand, they are layered with the authoritarian, institutional pathologies of the empires that have used them to justify their oppressive power (“organized religion,” observed Blake: “a contradiction in terms”).

If ancient religious traditions were originally unable to curb human hubris to prevent the emergence of empires, or to reconstitute some transcendent human community on the ruins of the ancient villages destroyed by those empires, they are even more inadequate today. We may find in them some useful insights—the way the poor people on the outskirts of Cairo, Sao Paulo and elsewhere sort through the rags and refuse of vast proto- and post-industrial middens to find some small thing of use. But like the ruins in lower Manhattan and Afghanistan, these vestiges are still smoldering, radioactive, capable of new explosive combinations. The gods will not save us.

Whether we derive our insight from ancient wisdom traditions or modern secular traditions or both, it should be clear that we are all in this together. To paraphrase a now-famous bodhisattva from Los Angeles, we must learn to get along or suffer the consequences. As an anarchist wag commented on the now apparently ubiquitous “Irish question,” burn your bibles, not your neighbors. Hierarchic religion, statism, narrow nationalism and patriotism, as well as imperial arrogance and the inhuman anti-imperial resentment that has come to mirror it, are the enemies not only of the possibility of realizing our human potential, but of our very survival.

Fundamentalist jihad and imperial repression are not our only options. A secular cosmopolitanism that honors spirit; that is humane, skeptical, compassionate; that embraces an international human solidarity and respect for

the divinity of each person, and of the integrity of the intricate ecological life-webs and culture-webs that have so slowly evolved; and finally, that challenges the equation between powerful and the powerless: that is not merely an alternative path out of the crisis we face; it is pretty much the only way out.

Everywhere on this planet people are struggling to defend the fragile webs of life, to feed their children, to plant the next crop. They have no interest in war, at least when they have the ability to reflect on the consequences of war. They have a natural sympathy for children—therefore for the generations to come. Why——“in god’s name,” some of them would say—are they letting themselves be swept along into the maelstrom of war? [5]

## 2. The empire and its enemies

I had been reading Guillaume Apollinaire’s *calligramme*, or concrete poem, “Little Car” on September 11 when I heard the news. The poem relates Apollinaire’s traveling in France in a motorcar as troops were being mobilized on the eve of the First World War, a war in which he would fight, and receive wounds that would later kill him. I was grateful later for its excitement, unease and retrospective foreboding, its “looming angry giants,” its announcement that “Whole populations were rapidly rushing toward earth shaking encounters,” that “The dead were trembling anxiously in their dark dwellings.”

As the twentieth century gathered its energies along with great armies about to clash, Apollinaire observed, “We said our farewells to an entire epoch.” I wrote in my journal the morning after the attacks, “We have most certainly entered a new era...The whole country is reeling...” I too seemed to be saying my farewell to some previous life.

After news spread of the attacks, many people gathered around television sets to watch the news—a media experience that, both in the content of the images and the experience of watching with a group, offered a sense of community. This intense focus on the suffering in New York, simultaneously compassionate and voyeuristic, persuaded people that they were witnesses, rather than mere spectators, of someone else’s misfortune. The disaster-movie thrill of the destruction, the “towering inferno” effect, did not nullify the empathy; the victims’ individual stories, the anguish of their friends and families, were heart-rending.

But a focused light leaves background in shadow. The public grief, assiduously manipulated and combined with a convenient social amnesia about events prior to September 11, rapidly succumbed to an unreflective, ahistorical bathos and imperial narcissism. While the plebes kept their eyes on the flag, the police state was quickly assembled and Enron stole their money. [6]

The carnage in New York was surely horrific, the ruthless single-mindedness of the suicide bombers disturbing. But few Americans even noticed the Afghan villagers later killed and injured by US air strikes, which even if unintended, were an inevitable outcome of such massive bombing, and therefore foreseeable.

(“Terrorism”: what is this word but a sheep bleat, a racist imprecation, meaning what “they” do to “us?” State terrorism does not figure in. Thus, according to the canon, the poor and desperate population of remnant Palestine, resisting a brutal and illegal colonial occupation, is “terrorist”; when a conquered people fights back with its meager means—stones, small arms, some explosives, and their willingness to die—that is “violence.” The occupation itself—the theft of precious land and water, the smashing of houses and uprooting of ancient orchards, the ever-expanding colonial settlements, the humiliation and beatings at myriad checkpoints, the mowing down of children for throwing stones at their oppressors, the missiles fired at apartment buildings, the tanks crushing ambulances, the starvation blockades and lockdowns, the mass arrests—that is not to be questioned. The occupiers, realizing their dream of Zionist *lebensraum* by despoiling another people of their lands, their history, are “our allies.” And though Palestinian violence has in some cases been vicious and indiscriminate, to compare it with the far greater violence of the occupiers is to offend basic human decency.)

Contrary to the arrogant vanity of a population that can only mourn “its own,” American suffering, however terrible, was a drop in an ocean of pain. People have been dying in droves for a long time. Indeed, some of the hecatombs have even been documented fleetingly on television. And it should hardly be controversial (though it seems to be increasingly dangerous) to recall that the United States government, either directly or through proxies, has perpetrated a very large portion of the dying. US arms industries and markets surpass those of all other countries combined. No other state has its soldiers, ships and air forces patrolling every continent; no military ma-

chine comes even remotely close to having bombed so many countries throughout the twentieth century. And is it necessary to list the governments overthrown by the CIA, and the staggering human toll paid by people from Chile to Indonesia to the Congo to Iran?

One recent vivid example will suffice to make the point. Since the Persian Gulf War, in which several hundred thousand Iraqis were largely massacred by an army so superior that it suffered only minor, self-inflicted (“friendly fire”) casualties, a war US pilots called “a turkey shoot,” a million or more Iraqis have died from preventable diseases brought on or aggravated by the hunger, lack of medicine and clean water imposed by the post-war sanctions. Clearly, sanctions are a complicated shadow theater in which the United States, the Iraqi dictatorship, and the oil sheiks of the Gulf all profit in different ways. It should come as no surprise; Hussein was a US ally and trading partner even when he was crushing dissent, attacking his neighbors and gassing his own people in the 1980s.

When, on the May 12, 1996 broadcast of *60 Minutes*, reporter Lesley Stahl asked then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright if the suffering caused by sanctions, including the death by illness and hunger of perhaps half a million children, was “worth the price,” the Dragon Lady replied, “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.” Albright’s morality of ends and means was identical to that of the September 11 hijackers, except that the number of her victims was vastly greater.

Disaster and immense, institutionalized global suffering are not only daily affairs, but in fact essential consequences of imperial economic plunder and military domination from which global elites, and to some lesser degree the majority of people of the advanced industrial world, benefit. On September 11, assuming that annual deaths could be evenly spread, some twenty-four thousand people died of starvation in the world.

Might Americans learn something from reflecting on the fact that though the United States is only six percent of the world’s population, it consumes forty percent of the world’s resources? Might the dizzying economic globalization of everything and subsequent deleterious effects on the living conditions of the world’s poor have anything to do with the universal resentment against Americans? Does a US foreign policy that supports and arms Israel—more than three billion dollars annually in military aid, and aggressive political support in the UN, vetoing and impeding dozens of resolutions condemning the occupation—explain any of the anger in the Middle East?

Do the massive (and lucrative) US arms transfers to corrupt and repressive regimes in the Middle East—eighty percent of their arms imports, in fact, more than sixty billion dollars in sales since the Gulf War—and the monstrous sanctions against the people of Iraq help in any way to explain why the bin Ladens of the world can recruit young men to kill themselves and others in a jihad? Is there no relationship between the profound injustices this empire has unleashed, or ignored, or to which it has actively contributed, and the nihilism of the enemies that such injustice spawns?

These are massacres few in this country have hovered around televisions to observe. People wonder instead why anyone would hate *us*, when, as their President Select—the nearest thing we have to an actual emperor—assures them, we are so *good*. But when we consider the immense amount of violence this empire has unleashed on so many countries, one wonders why Guatemalan Indians or Salvadoran or Vietnamese peasants—all killed in the hundreds of thousands and the millions—didn’t take revenge for the genocide this country and its pawns dealt out to them.

Bin Laden makes perfect sense when he warns that as long as this empire has its legions in the Middle East there will be war. In fact, the oil barons have interests there, but in the long run, none of the rest of us do. And when he declares, “Neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine,” he has a point there too; why should we be safe when the Palestinian people are not, since we are bankrolling this brutality?

If the plebes agree that the empire’s soldiers must be able to patrol the whole planet, that their imperial oligarchy must reign supreme, then they had better prepare for impact: a never-ending struggle in which more of them will die, perhaps in droves, like those millions of others. No justice, no peace—is that so unreasonable? The American people should work for peace with justice, not only because it is in our self-interest, but also because it is right.

If there were such a thing as an enlightened empire (I know, a contradiction in terms), it would do well to get its soldiers out of Saudi Arabia, lift the pitiless siege against Iraq, and break its compact with the Israeli settler state, using its power to impose a just solution for the Palestinians. It might even use its military might to drive the Israeli ethnic cleansers out of the twenty-two percent of historic Palestine the whole world agrees should be given back to

the Palestinians, the way it drove the Serbian ethnic cleansers out of Kosova. (Where, indeed, is NATO when you really need it?)

This empire is anything but enlightened—we're in the Caligula and Nero phase. And, as someone quipped during the last Persian Gulf War, oil is the capitalist system's crack cocaine. So, like Aguirre cutting his way into the jungle in search of El Dorado, the plutocrats and their toadies are gearing up their bulldozers, drills and chainsaws, aiming them toward the last of our wild places to fuel the industrial machine, while preparing, with the collusion of local dictators, another Saudi Arabia in Central Asia. In any event, given their headlong rush to ecological collapse, life on earth appears destined to suffer ecological ruin, and people to die in droves, with or without war. [7]

But we need not delude ourselves. The terrible violence against the human spirit, the willful destruction of innocents, the sanctification of murder—they are hardly the monopoly of the rogue superpower (a redundant term). Let us not pretend that the answer lies in some fantasy of conflict resolution in which enough negotiation, talking and reasoning will solve every difference. Sadly, in some cases conflict resolution comes out of the barrel of a gun.

Nor should we deceive ourselves that China or Russia or Japan or Pakistan or any other state would meekly follow the Golden Rule if evil Amerikkka disappeared, as it sometimes seems to be implied. (For example, at anti-war demonstrations in Detroit some stalinoid militant brandishes a sign proclaiming, "The REAL Terrorists Are In Washington," as if there were no other "real" terrorists elsewhere. This is palindrome-think.) History was already more complex, more cruel than that before the US empire even appeared, and it might be even more complex and cruel long after the US empire—and with it perhaps some useful libertarian and democratic-secular traditions that grew with it—disappears. We will have to find ways to resist the New World Disorder of jihad along with the New World Order of Mc World.

The Taliban fanatics, for example, with their public executions, stonings and beatings, their swinish contempt for history and culture, and who are surely not missed after their squalid satrapy collapsed to the manifest joy of many Afghans—these petty despots banned, along with music, dance and chess (yes, and television—even a 'broken clock is on time once a day), even kites. I remember thinking when I learned of that, that any tyranny that bans kites cannot last long. Later, I learned that kites are cherished in traditional Afghan culture. It occurred to me that the Taliban remained in power as long as they did perhaps only because they had lifted the ban on kites. That gave me some small measure of hope. When they were driven out, the people started singing and dancing again (yes, and watching television, what can you do?)—there had to be some small but meaningful measure of satisfaction in that, even if Afghanistan's problems are not even remotely resolved. [8]

Dealing with the Taliban and other like gangsters, whoever is going to do it, will take violence. The Tom Paine-Sojourner Truth-Emma Goldman republic that might gain my loyalty would do its best to fight them.

### 3. History, myth and tragedy

According to George Stephanopolis's memoir of the White House, *All Too Human*, when Somali attacks on US soldiers humiliated the US mission there, President Clinton ordered attacks on civilian targets. "We're not inflicting pain on these fuckers," Clinton said, and then, "with his face reddening, his voice rising, and his fist pounding his thigh," he leaned angrily into Tony Lake, his national security advisor, and raged, "I believe in killing people who try to hurt you. And I can't believe we're being pushed around by these two-bit pricks."

On day twelve of the bombing of Afghanistan the US hit a building housing a United Nations mine-removal project and the Red Cross. That day, bombing may have killed several hundred people. A destroyer captain, whose ship was firing tomahawk missiles a thousand miles away into Afghanistan, called his work "business as usual." According to the same news report, in-country, a farmer tending his meager field was killed by shrapnel.

The original idea of paradise in the prehistoric Middle East was probably the image of an oasis. In a perverse irony, the first aerial bombing in history was a revenge attack in 1911 on two oases in North Africa, when Lieutenant Giulio Cavotti dropped four hand grenades from a monoplane outside Tripoli, Libya on November 1, 1911. The Italians, on the way to building their own empire, were in the process of conquering North Africa at the expense of the Ottoman Turks.

“The war was a godsend for the Italian pilots,” writes Sven Lindqvist acidly in *A History of Bombing* (2000). “Just three years after the first exhibition of flight in Paris, they would now have a chance to battle-test the new weapon.” According to a newspaper report at the time, “Noncombatants, young and old, were slaughtered ruthlessly, without compunction and without shame.”

In a 1912 book on the Tripoli war cited by Lindqvist, Gustav Janson described the exhilaration of the Italian aviators on their bombing runs: “the empty earth beneath him, the empty sky above and he, the solitary man, sailing between them! A feeling of power seizes him. He was flying through space to assert the indisputable superiority of the white race. Within his reach he had the proof, seven high-explosive bombs. To be able to sling them from the heavens themselves—that was convincing and irrefutable.- Anticipating the laconic utterance of an American military officer during the Vietnam War, “We had to destroy the city to save it,” the Italians had to bomb paradise in order to civilize it.

Lindqvist comments, “It could not be denied that airplanes and bombs were examples of progress in military technology. And technology was civilization. Civilization brought with it the duty to expand civilization. By violent means, if necessary, even with war, if the uncivilized offered resistance.” This meant bombing civilians, even a funeral or a hospital, as Jansen’s pilot did. “The civilizing mission of the technologically superior Italians was of a higher order, they said, than human laws and humanitarian rules.” One European legal scholar wrote, “When the highest principles of civilization contradict the written laws of humanity, the latter must give way—colonial law rests in its entirety on this assumption.”

This woeful tale should suffice to convince us that the idea of civilization is a kind of myth—a political myth concealing a far bleaker reality. [9] This is even more true of the ideology of “modern civilization,” by which “we” are supposed to distinguish ourselves from the barbarian Other.

In fact, civilization and empire go together. What is conveniently called civilization has not neutralized the brutalities of archaic societies, with their mountains of skulls, their flayings and “authentic” face-to-face tortures; instead, it has accumulated these horrors and wedded them to its push-button exterminism. (The Nazi Holocaust was an amalgam of bureaucratic planning and primitive handwork that would have been recognizable to the ancient Hittites. And the high-tech quality of the American war against the Vietnamese did not prevent US soldiers from collecting “Vietcong” ears.)

A longer view will tell us there have been many empires, and many styles of anti-imperial resistance. One thinks of Spartacus and other nameless rebels against the ancient slave-states, vaguely referenced in tablets and chronicles. I would like to trace my anti-imperialism to these primordial models, even if I do not claim their celebrated stoic vitality, and in particular from the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, who when told by Alexander the Great, the most powerful man in the known world, that he would grant him any wish, told the emperor to move aside, since he was standing in the way of his sunlight. [10]

Contrary to the notion that imperialism is the last stage of capitalism, as Lenin’s formula has it, imperialism is in a sense integral to the first stage of an “ur-capital,” the mutation of relatively egalitarian tribal circles into hierarchic pyramids of power, and, eventually, to the first states of ancient Mesopotamia. [11] Sadly, this region, the so-called fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates (present-day Iraq), is still horribly wracked and bleeding from the conflicts of state society, still living under despotism and siege, and facing further assault by the Crusader-Cowboy Empire.

No one can easily explain the origins of empire, any more than we can readily explain the threads of pathology in the human personality. It would be to solve the riddle of the conflict of Abel and Cain. The emergence of the original archon—meaning leader, and from which we get the suffix -archy, as in monarchy, hierarchy, and of course anarchy or “non-archy”—suggests a rupture in an original community, probably caused by some great crisis or catastrophe, perhaps after a gradual breakdown in the mutualism and egalitarianism of tribal society.

Through this series of events the state emerges. The state is a kind of protection racket in which heavily armed hunters and raiders form a phalanx of fighters, a gang around some charismatic individual (a man, of course), to exact obedience and tribute from the others. (This should sound familiar to us—it describes both the gangsters in Washington and the gangsters of al Qaeda, though their relative scope, power and reach is enormously different.) Once established, this organization embarks on the massive construction of monuments, pyramids and obelisks (men building monuments to their phalluses), and territorial expansion. As Stanley Diamond has observed, civi-

lization is conquest abroad and slavery at home. This is the beginning of empire, the beginning of the state, and of an economy that is not based on gift-giving. [12]

To expand power and seize needed resources the archon must invade his neighbors, seize their forests, minerals and crops, and kidnap their people, converting the former into hoarded wealth and the latter into cheap labor. The other villages respond, organize, and resist, and so doing, begin to resemble the aggressors. The horrible dialectic of history begins to unfold in a cycle of revenge, war and conquest. We see in it the Trojan War, Rome, and the Crusades. We see the conquest of Africa, Asia and the Americas by Europe, and we see modern “civilization,” with its perennial wars, too.

Anyone who has studied the ancient myths of the fertile crescent may recognize in the scenario of the original archon the primordial myth of Gilgamesh, who, aided by the domesticated wild man Enkidu, went to the wilderness to kill the forest spirit Humbaba and to cut down the mysterious tree of life that this spirit protected. That’s how the original forests of Lebanon were cut—for the archon’s temples, his wagons, his battering rams, his ships.

Every empire must have a frontier, and every frontier a sacrifice zone. The trees get cut, the metals mined. The resources change, but the story is recognizable. It’s the same process we are witnessing today, in the progressive, megatech industrialization and commodification of the planet through globalization, and the wars for black gold.

Whether doing construction or destruction, the work and war gangs—an army of warriors and an army of drudges slaving in mines, in fields, and in workshops to support the state and its adventures—function under the same principles. They are essentially the first machines, groups of men organized as machines. They are what Lewis Mumford, in his encyclopedic *The Myth of the Machine* (1970), called megamachines, or big machines. This is true of all empires today, and the resulting global chaos in which the difference between so-called wartime and peacetime has become little more than a question of semantics.

We still live enfolded in myth, however banal it has become—our myths of progress, of the battle between light and darkness (the “Axis of Evil”)—even the myth that we have somehow escaped mythic thinking and mythic patterns. But myth contains useful insight, particularly the idea of tragedy, from which we might take some useful lesson. According to this pattern, the archon, taking appearances for reality, following his own naked ambition, his blind will to power and his hubris, inevitably brings about a catastrophe for himself and for others. This is the image of Macbeth, my own favorite tragic villain, vowing to “let the frame of things disjoint” to achieve his own narrow, egocentric ends.

Humanity has long recognized the tragic dimension of history, but we have not found our way out of history’s labyrinth, and placed myth where it belongs: not in the temple of power but in the kinds of truths it can teach us about life, and about human limits. We need to do so soon; we are running out of time.

Every empire must eventually face tragic reversal. As Diogenes said, “A man keeps and feeds a lion. The lion owns a man.” This insight is echoed in one of the shrewdest and most prescient literary works of the nineteenth century, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, when Victor Frankenstein’s monster, which has escaped the power of the young scientist and has started to run amok, declares to him: “You are my creator, but I am your master.”

The wizards at the US Central Intelligence Agency (let us pause to consider that term!), attempting to get their feeble mental grasp on the monsters they themselves have helped to conjure in their satanic mills, call this phenomenon “blow-back.” This term does manage to recognize the inevitable tragic revenge, the feedback loop of imperial arrogance, with its wanton, hallucinatorily destructive power. This nemesis did what no previous enemy has been able to do—it smashed them in their citadel, Murder Central, where the genocide against the Vietnamese was organized, where the slaughter in Iraq was overseen. That is where planners have mapped contingency plans for the invasion of every single country on earth, even so-called friends (as someone notoriously quipped, empires have no friends, only interests). That is where they plan not only the Third World War but even the Fourth, when submarines will surface to nuke the ruins.

And of course, the Pentagon is where the most powerful empire in history has directed its campaign against one of history’s saddest, most wretched places, killing more people in the retaliation than were killed in the original attack. [13] There, cluster bombs have scattered thousands more active mines in a country that has been described as the most mined place on earth, and depleted uranium dust from exploded munitions blows across the desert, undermining the health of some of the world’s poorest people. [14]

Blow-back: according to reporter David Remnick in the September 24 issue of *The New Yorker*, the FBI director and his staff were meeting when the World Trade Center was hit in New York. Though the FBI had studied scenarios of terror attacks, Remnick explains, this one “was not in anyone’s plans or imagination.” An FBI official remarked, “There was a feeling of helplessness. We were all waiting to see what was going to happen.” That is of course what the rest of us were doing; so much for the “intelligence” of cops.

This is what Mumford, in *The Myth of the Machine*, called the inevitable “self-inflicted impotence” which is “the other side of ‘total control.’” The imperial Death Star can unleash its panoply of megatechnic might, but it cannot stop the gremlins from infecting and undermining the machinery because international industrial-capitalism is too ubiquitous and too porous to monitor completely or control.

The hijackers commandeered history with box knives, a bit of technical training (provided by a wondrous free market to anyone with the money to pay), a few airplane schedules, and the daring of the essentially primitive warrior who fought at Troy. A skyscraper and a jet plane—two quintessential representations of modern technology, yet also archetypal Trojan Horses to deliver the perverse revenge of desperate men—were easily turned into an enormous fuel-bomb. The burning, collapsed skyscraper itself became a technological problem—a toxic disaster, whether they decided simply to leave it or salvage it. Lower Manhattan remains permeated with hideous, undoubtedly toxic, chemicals; the revenge continues—the revenge of our complex chemical way of life. And yet the crackpot realists of “Homeland Security” tell us that a vast fabric of complicated, hazardous, industrial interdependency—every nuclear power plant, chemical factory and other megatechnic-industrial complex—can be protected. [15]

Live normally, the Emperor urges the citizens, and then, in the next breath, in the passive-aggressive style of post-modern half-life, he warns: beware of imminent attack! That some people desire to perpetrate massive disasters is distinctly evident. But mass technics inevitably cause disasters, *even when no one is willing it*. [16]

In a world as inhuman and subjectively dysfunctional as capitalism, some percentage of the population will voluntarily cause wanton destruction, set forest fires, plant bombs, etc., in a kind of Sadean “play,” without any political pretext. They represent a new incarnation of the dada Jacques Vaché’s insolence, his threat to fire a gun randomly into a crowd to illustrate the “theatrical and joyless futility of everything.”

Similarly, the suicide bombers were not religious fanatics in any simple sense; they were men for whom life had somehow become so crushing, and rage so great, that a single, ultimate act of revenge became a way out. There are others like them everywhere. As the planes screamed toward the fortress and the towers, they must have felt some terrible exhilaration. They were satisfying their rage by striking out at the hated empire—and at life. The exhilaration leaves a residue—there will be more of them, no matter how harshly, or even how wisely, the empire responds. (And since the empire is administered by venal fools, it will surely continue to respond in the worst way, ensuring further counter-response.)

Capitalism has moved more populations around than any previous cataclysm in human history, uprooting whole peoples, annihilating others. Now this turmoil and dynamism—what its publicists tell us makes capitalism great—has taken on its own momentum, and the guardians of the temple can only fumble and struggle with the consequences, like Captain Ahab with his ship.

The ship once seemed to encompass the whole of history; now it has begun to shrink dramatically, to look like other empires: corrupt, brutal, ponderous, brittle, unimaginative and inevitably impermanent. It will sink, one way or the other, like all imperial civilizations that have come before. No one knows what lies in those depths. That is in fact the definition of catastrophe, both etymologically and in the classic tragedy: a turning downward, the horizon beyond which we cannot see. What is coming, as the gumshoe told the reporter, is “not in anyone’s plans or imagination.” We are all now at least potential collateral damage. That is what changed for Americans, heretofore largely immune from the ongoing catastrophe, on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

#### **4. This is the place to leap**

And so, welcome to the twenty-first century! Ah, love, let us be true to one another—so another poet put it, as ignorant armies clashed...



The war in Afghanistan and the wars likely to spread beyond, so representative of the myriad conflicts that have gone on and on at the end of the last millennium and the beginning of this—all the terrible, wasteful, devastating traumas to human beings, to their cultures and histories, and to the natural world that sustains us—make clear that we are indeed in some new and terrible epoch. The fault lines the hijackers have begun to reveal to us are old ones, rooted in the conflicts of old empires, but they also reflect the new levels of desolation brought about by the contemporary uprooting and eradication of the old vernacular world, the battering down of every last “Chinese wall” by a restless, implacable capitalism. In the end, this empire is destined like the rest to lie half-buried in the rubble of history like Shelley’s *Ozymandias* in the desert.

In the tragedy, the catastrophe brings with it a terrible moment of recognition, of understanding. We are beginning to experience that recognition, but we are far from fully understanding it. For now, some obvious certainties do confront us—starting with the bald fact that for the foreseeable future the cycle of violence is likely to continue, and that Americans will bleed too. What follows, whether it comes to an end in one way or the other, will depend in some obscure way on all of us, though on no one of us.

To come up with a program would be arrogant—like trying to solve the problem of Mesopotamia or Rome, and the problem of their collapse. But if we examine the forking road ahead, leading this way to Thebes, that way to Colonus, we might discern the outline of a post-modern politics taking shape in the era of jihad and McWorld. On the one hand, the fundamentalist revolt, however decentralized, is hierarchic and authoritarian, secretive, ruthless. It mirrors the worst aspects of the empire it defies. [17] In contrast, whatever its shortcomings, that other response to the global capitalist work and war machine, the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico, embodies a balance of respect for local autonomy and a sense of connectedness to an international culture based on justice, equality and inclusion. The Zapatistas’ impressive sense of humor, relative non-violence and lack of interest in taking power are all admirable. We fail to defend and to extend such promising manifestations of resistance and transformation at our peril.

*Hic Rhodus, Hic salta.* This is the place to leap. In *Findings and Keepings* (1975), Lewis Mumford warned that “if the forces that now dominate us continue on their present path they must lead to collapse of the whole historical fabric, not just this or that great nation or empire.” In the last quarter century those forces have accelerated, leaving in their wake a swathe of ruin, and palpably diminished possibilities for the transformation required to overcome this terrible crisis in human prospects.

We cannot avoid learning to live with catastrophe and its inescapable uncertainty and ambivalence, but we must find ways to act. We are now all passengers on a ship—not a single plane but the planet—which armed lunatics have seized in their determination to shatter the “frame of things” in pursuit of their tragic mirage of global power and wealth. If we face any historical task it can only be, like those people who died on flight 93, to emancipate the fragile forces of life by refusing to become instruments in the schemes of madmen. And so let us resist both their peace and their wars, and in so doing, find a way to push the emperors out of our way to let the light—and the darkness—in.

Whole populations are again rapidly rushing toward earth shaking encounters, the dead trembling anxiously in their dark dwellings. We are destined to suffer catastrophe one way or the other. Let us consider not the one way, but the other.

## Endnotes

1. See “The Clash of Ignorance,” at [www.zmag.org/saidclash.html](http://www.zmag.org/saidclash.html). Slovenian critic Slavoj Žižek makes a similar argument in “The Desert of the Real (*In These Times*, October 29, 2001). The ingenious idea of the palindromic image, reversed and yet also parallel, is Dubravka Ugrešić’s. See her *The Culture of Lies: Anti-political Essays* (1998).

2. This did not stop “Europe” from attempting to banish the “East” from its midst—notably, at the beginning of capitalism’s Five-Hundred-Year Reich with the violent expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Andalusia, and most recently, with the brutal genocide of the oriental “other” in Bosnia and attempted genocide in Kosovo. (Throughout the war against Bosnia, mass murderer Slobodan Milošević and his junior partner in genocide, Franjo Tuđman, both repeatedly insisted they were defending the West against Islamic fundamentalism.)

3. Hence it should also come as no surprise that Christian fundamentalists expressed what was essentially their approval of the murderous attack on the World Trade Center. “God will not be mocked,” intoned Jerry Falwell on Pat Robertson’s show, “The 700 Club.” The televangelists agreed that America was being punished for “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians.” Another right-wing ideologue, Ann Coulter at National Review, blustered, “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.”

4. The role of state socialism in mining Afghanistan is typically overlooked by leftists and left-liberal opponents of the US war. While it is undeniable that in many ways some women generally fared better during the brief rule of the pro-soviet regime, when the communists took power in 1978, they slaughtered twelve thousand members of Kabul’s educated elite in a campaign reminiscent of the Khmer Rouge. Thousands more were massacred in the countryside, and people were driven into the ranks of the mujahedin. By 1979 the leftist regime was devolving into internecine fighting and chaos; the USSR invaded, contributing its share to the social decomposition, bombing and destroying villages and attacking refugee columns, and scattering millions of “butterfly mines” around the countryside, before pulling out. See Pankaj Mishra, “The Making of Afghanistan,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 15, 2001.

5. I am not arguing for pacifism here. I accept non-violence as a worthy general principle, not as a dogma; people sometimes have no choice but to defend themselves. Rather, I am calling, at some level, for war on all fundamentalism—a war first of all of intellect and spirit, of discourse and politics, but also at some stage a war of self-defense, what we used to call “armed love.”

6. While some rescue workers looted the basement concourse of the World Trade Center in the aftermath of the attack, corporate war profiteers were already lining up for what one lobbyist gleefully called a “pig fest.” Massive tax cuts were granted to General Electric, IBM. General Motors, a slew of Texas oil companies and numerous other profitable corporations and the top one percent.

7. In fact, the future has already arrived. The hidden story beneath the war in Afghanistan is the worst drought in Southeast Asia in fifty to a hundred years. See “Afghan Drought Inflicts Its Own Misery,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2001.

8. The Pashtuns of northern Afghanistan, who were the ethnic base of the Taliban, are now suffering under the harrow of the (majority Tajik and Uzbek) Northern Alliance, now avenging Taliban massacres, brutality and plunder of the 1990s. Some fifty thousand people have been driven out, “telling tales of murder and rape and robbery, and leaving behind empty towns and grazing grounds” (*New York Times*, March 7, 2002). Though the new government has asked for a peacekeeping force to restore order to the area, the Western alliance has so far refused.

There may no longer be any resolution in the next decade or decades to the Afghan calamity, no path to a viable, stable society. Two decades of vicious war and warlordism cannot be annulled by waving a wand, be it a carrot or a stick. The country may be joining places like parts of West Africa or Somalia, where both central authority and functional society have imploded, and which have been written off by the international system, at least for the time being, as socio-economic dead zones. Oil greed may make reorganizing Afghanistan more urgent, but during the US intervention in Somalia, the Horn of Africa, too, was said to represent urgent oil interests.

9. The distinction between primitive myth and post-primitive and modern political myth is important. According to radical anthropologist Stanley Diamond, primitive myth resolves human ambivalence through ritual performance, “compressing the contradictions of human existence into a proto-tragic statement which in its awareness and integrity becomes its own transcendence.” In civilization, these rituals have withered, and ritual performance and sacrifice become literal sacrifice. Unresolved ambivalence underlies civilization’s murderous, even bureaucratic, operations against the other. See “The State of Being Jewish” in *Dialectical Anthropology* 8 (1983).

10. One also thinks of the rebel slave communes of like Quilombo in Brazil, or the Roanoke colonists who disappeared, leaving the message that they had “gone to Croatan,” which could only have meant, gone native. The Spanish explorer Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, shipwrecked in Florida in the sixteenth century and forced to walk the entire Gulf Coast back to the colony in Mexico, living among the native peoples he encountered along the way, said he gradually came to “see the possibilities of a life in which to be deprived of Europe was not to be deprived of too much.” We have much to learn from this painfully acquired wisdom.

11. This is Fredy Perlman’s insight. See his *Against His-story, Against Leviathan* (1983). The state developed in other places, I know—for example, among the hierarchic, militaristic Aztecs. I know also that my story of the circle and

the pyramid is a myth, a metaphor; I think it a useful one. There is no escaping myth; even the idea of the “end of myth” and the death of the gods must unavoidably transpire in a mythic dimension.

12. See Diamond’s *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (1981).

13. According to a conservative analysis of casualties done by Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire, US bombs killed at least 3,767 civilians between October 7 and December 10. This did not include people who died later of bomb injuries or who died of hunger, preventable illness or cold. Nor did it include combatant deaths, which by mid-December had reached perhaps ten thousand. See Seumas Milne, “The innocent dead in a coward’s war,” *The Guardian*, December 20, 2001.

14. More evidence of contemptible imperial narcissism is the anxiety about the possibility that so-called “dirty bombs”—conventional explosives used to spread radioactive material—might be exploded by terrorists in American cities. Comparable health effects on Afghans by depleted uranium weapons are never considered.

15. According to a former nuclear engineer I know, “Three scuba divers with some C-4 explosive could melt down a nuclear power plant. Of course, these idiots at the power companies don’t want to spend the money to protect the intake pipes for the cooling towers—too expensive.”

16. Why industrial capitalism is an ongoing chemical explosion. oil spill, radiation leak, systems failure. etc. See my *Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire & Its Enemies* (1998). As Charles Perrow argues in *Natural Accidents: Living With High-Risk Technology*, “Systems that transform explosive or toxic raw materials or that exist in hostile environments appear to require designs that entail a great many interactions which are not visible and in expected production sequence. Since nothing is perfect—neither designs, equipment, operating procedure, materials and supplies, nor the environment—there will be failures. These accidents then are caused initially by component failures, but become accidents rather than incidents because of the nature of the system itself; they are system accidents, and are inevitable, or ‘normal’ for these systems.” Perrow is quoted in Tara Jones, *Corporate Killing: Bhopals Will Happen* (1988).

17. It is interesting that no communiqué was even released after the September attacks, a rather post-modern phenomenon. Instead, language surrendered to silence, and to a wanton violence that does not merely mirror the violence of the metropole, but rather raises the ante in ways that are perversely creative, indirect and utterly baroque.

This essay is based in part on a talk given at an antiwar teach-in at the University of Michigan/Dearborn in October 2001. A different version, aimed at writers and artists, will be published in the spring of 2002 in *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* (Etruscan Press), edited by William Heyen. See [www.etruscanpress.com](http://www.etruscanpress.com) for more information.

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