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After '911': Defending the Global City

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EXTRACT FROM THE SYMPOSIUM ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2001: TERRORISM, ISLAM AND THE WEST

After '911': Defending The Global City

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A few months on, we have grown accustomed to seeing what happened in the USA on 11 September 2001 as a watershed event in modern global history. Perhaps it has been, in many different ways, but on the other hand it has also merely accentuated some global issues that we have already been grappling with for some time. In particular, the events have highlighted the intractability of one of the most difficult questions of our time: how are we to live together in a globalized world? The 'war on terror', which is politically and morally sanctioned by the wounded superpower's desire to stamp out those who threaten the peaceful living together of nations, addresses this question at the global international level; but the issue of how to live 'together in difference' is perhaps even more acute at the local level, not just in the USA but everywhere (Ang, 2001). In this light, it is what happened in and to New York that is most globally relevant and significant.

While the unprecedented terrorist attacks of 11 September also destroyed the Pentagon in Washington, it was the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York – images of which were repeated endlessly and obsessively on our television screens – that will remain most vividly and indefinitely etched on the world's memory. While the Pentagon represents *American* military power, the significance of New York transcends that national dimension of US hegemony. New York is not 'America', but a global city that is the recognized capital of global modernity, a place characterized by the dynamism and energy of a transnational urbanism made and remade over the decades of the 20th century by millions of immigrants from all over the world (Smith, 2001).

I wish to hold on to this image of the cosmopolitan, multicultural metropolis in our considerations of the aftermath of '911' and its likely impact on the shape of the new century. The global city represents many things, but one of its main meanings is that it is the key location of immigration-led cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism. In social and cultural as well as economic terms, the global city is a place where the erosion of the boundaries of the nation state can be most clearly observed. It is the place where people from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds settle in search of a better life, creating in the process a polyglot urban environment where rubbing shoulders with heterogeneous others is an unavoidable fact of life. Conflict is a recurring element in this process, signifying the continuing existence of interracial or intercultural antipathies and incompatibilities which remain very difficult to overcome. But there are also always multiple instances of mutual exchange and cooperation, articulated in the proliferation of hybrid cultural practices that transcend fixed identities and closed community boundaries. In this respect, the global city is where ideological recourse to the discourse of a 'clash of civilizations' will always be ultimately problematized. In other words, the complex heterogeneity of intercultural relations in the global city provides us with a key practical guard against all forms of fundamentalism

and absolutism, ethnic or otherwise, and therefore against the hardening of dangerous binary oppositions such as that between 'Islam' and the 'West'.

In New York itself, old racial antagonisms were said to have been dissolved – at least temporarily – in the wake of the trauma of '911', but they have been replaced by new anxieties (Sengupta, 2001). Indeed, it is ironic that while racial minority groups that have generally been at the receiving end of racist treatment (such as African Americans, Latinos and Asians) now feel apparently more united with all New Yorkers, people of Middle Eastern appearance, especially those who are Muslims, are now collectively the target of prejudicial suspicion and hostility. This has been a pattern across all big western cities: the level of physical aggression aimed against women wearing the veil, for example, has been extremely disturbing.

In Australia, where the events of 11 September unhappily coincided with a huge moral panic over the arrival of 'illegal' boat people from Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries, the Conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard justified its hard stance against these asylum seekers by insinuating that there might be terrorists among them. Predictably, there has been widespread antagonism – expressed in popular avenues such as talkback radio – against immigrants of Muslim faith on the grounds that they were not willing to assimilate into mainstream Australian culture. However, it is reassuring to know that the flaring up of such expressions of racial/cultural intolerance is never generally supported; indeed, in the plural context of the global city, counter-voices always emerge, emphasizing solidarity, tolerance, mutual collaboration and recognition of a 'common humanity'. This does not necessarily have to do with idealistic highmindedness, but – more pragmatically – with the simple fact that diversity is an irreversible empirical reality in the global city. It is this fundamental openness of life in the urban metropolis which we need to appreciate more fully, in all its complex implications.

We know all too well, of course, that the global city is by no means a harmonious multicultural paradise. Nor is it a safe place, as the collapse of the World Trade Center has all too dramatically reminded us. Instances of racial and cultural antagonism can and do cause major destruction. Most global cities – whether New York, Paris, Sydney, Singapore or Sao Paulo – experience violence and strife as a result of conflicts that are ethnically marked in one way or another. These are inevitable, and their sources need to be taken seriously. Thus, we should not simply celebrate the cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism of the metropolis as a more advanced, civilized way of life. Indeed, I believe that the lesson of '911' is much more sobering than that. The global city is of cultural importance today because it is a space where the modern experience of 'togetherness in difference' is a central reality, from which we can and must ongoingly learn. It is a space of possibility where, out of necessity, practical multiculturalism cannot but be tried out, explored, creatively invented in concrete ways, with multifarious, indeterminate consequences. In the everyday practice of collective interaction and intermingling, the social reality of the global city provides us with an indispensable de facto defense against the melodramatic absolutization of 'good' and 'evil' – an understandable reaction but one we must avoid, at all costs, after '911'.

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