From the Depths of Despair: Performance, Counterperformance, and "September 11"

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After introducing a perspective on terrorism as postpolitical and after establishing the criteria for success that are immanent in this form of antipolitical action, this essay interprets September 11, 2001, and its aftermath inside a cultural-sociological perspective. After introducing a macro-model of social performance that combines structural and semiotic with pragmatic and power-oriented dimensions, I show how the terrorist attack on New York City and the counterattacks that immediately occurred in response can be viewed as an iteration of the performance/counterperformance dialectic that began decades, indeed centuries, ago in terms of the relation of Western expansion and Arab-Muslim reaction. I pay careful attention to the manner in which the counterperformance of New Yorkers and Americans develops an idealized, liminal alternative that inspired self-defense and outrage, leading to exactly the opposite performance results from those the al-Qaeda terrorists had intended.

To understand the sociological processes that created "September 11" (hereafter also referred to as "9/11") and what transpired politically, morally, and humanly during that tragic time and its aftermath, and also to understand how to prevent a tragic eternal return, we must reflect on the theoretical presuppositions that underlie our empirical perceptions. We need to theorize terrorism differently, thinking of its violence less in physical and instrumental terms than as a particularly gruesome kind of symbolic action in a complex performative field. If we do, we will understand, as well, how the American response to that terror thwarted its nihilistic intention and established a counterperformance that continues to structure the cultural pragmatics of national and international politics today.

TERRORISM AS (POST)POLITICAL

Terrorism can be understood as a form of political action, one of a very specific type. It is distinguished first by the sustained violence of its principal methods, in contrast to a politics that relies on organization and communication or one that rests, like those of most nation-states in their foreign relations, on the periodic but discrete application of coercion and force. Terrorism is distinguished, second, by the isolation of its practitioners, in contrast not only to the communal character of mass organizations but also even to the vanguard politics of Leninism, which seeks to establish thick network relations with groups whose ideology it can mold and whose solidarity it can claim.

Finally, terrorism is distinguished by the relative diffuseness of its ideology. Drunk on grandiose delusions of the millennium and on visions that make worldly success impossible in realistic terms, terrorist ideology cannot spell out the political steps to achieve its ideological aims. Because of this yawning gap between ideals and realities, the working ideology of terrorism focuses almost exclusively on tactics and rather little on broader strategy. Another way of putting this is to say that terrorism focuses on deeds more than words.

These disjunctions reflect the institutional failures that breed a politics of terror, which flourishes only in social situations where *politics*, in the classical sense of the term, has not been allowed free play (Crick 1962). In much of the contemporary Arab-Islamic world, national and regional institutions have flattened drastically and have narrowed the dynamics of political will-formation. Discursive, democratic, and humane forms of political expression have become impossible.

Hobsbawm (1959) once called banditry and peasant riots *prepolitical*—to differentiate them from the militant and sometimes violent revolutionary politics that characterized what he took to be the normal, class-war politics of his day. Contemporary terrorism might be called *postpolitical*. It reflects the end of political possibility. In this sense, September 11 expresses, and displaces, the bitterness of an Arab nationalism whose promises of state-building, economic development, and full citizenship lay in tatters throughout the North African and Middle Eastern world. Terrorism is post- rather than prepolitical in another sense as well. Its profound experience of political impotence is expressed not merely in cultural or metaphysical terms but in a hungry will to power and a manifest ambition to rebuild a great Arab-Muslim state.

Rather than defeating its opponents through political struggle, terrorism seeks to draw blood. Its tactics deliver maiming and death; they serve a strategy of inflicting humiliation, chaos, and reciprocal despair. Beyond these primordial ambitions lie three destabilizing aims. These flow in increasingly powerful ripples from the initial drawing of blood:

- To create *political* instability by murdering key leaders and overwhelming the immediate political process;

- To achieve *social* instability by disrupting networks of exchange and by sowing such fear that distrust becomes normal and chaos ensues; and

- To create *moral* instability by inducing authorities to respond to these political and social threats with repressive actions that will delegitimate key institutions in their own society. Such repression may be domestic or foreign, and it is less a matter of actual engagement in violent and suppressive actions than of how these actions are framed.

THE POSTPOLITICAL AND THE CIVIL

Does terrorist action typically succeed in these aims? This depends on context. Success is a direct function of the authoritarian nature of the regime against which terrorism takes aim. Postpolitical tactics are much less likely to succeed in societies that allow politics to mediate power, and this is particularly the case in legitimate, deeply rooted democratic regimes. Postpolitical action certainly does produce significant, sometimes world-historical, and almost always existentially horrendous effects. In societies that

have more developed civil spheres, however, such effects are not nearly as transformative as their initiators had hoped.

The seemingly demonic ferocity of terrorists, their ruthless willingness to sacrifice the lives of others and their own, indeed does draw blood and does create social and political chaos and instability. The slaughterhouse of World War I began with terrorist assassination. Anarchist and syndicalist violence in late 19th-century America marked new phases of anticapitalist agitation. The activities of the Red Brigades, Baader-Meinhof gang, and Weathermen in the late 1960s and early 1970s sent shock waves of terror throughout significant parts of the Italian, German, and American populations. White militia groups wreaked terrible havoc in Oklahoma City and elsewhere in the 1990s.

Still, none of these terrorist waves, so effective in narrowly postpolitical terms, succeeded in translating their immediate tactical "achievements" into the broader strategic aims of moral delegitimation and regime change. The reason is clear: in civil societies, to eschew the tactic of politics is to be blinded in broader strategic terms. In democratic societies, in order to achieve broad effects political actors must orient their tactics to address the moral frameworks that compel the larger population. This is exactly what terrorism cannot do. It is hardly surprising then that on September 11, the terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers produced exactly the opposite effect than the one they had in mind.

This broad sociological claim about the ineffectiveness of terrorism in a civil society might be countered by pointing to earlier terrorist movements, from the Irish and South African to the Zionist and Palestinian, which seemly did achieve institutional success. It would take a different and much more comparative essay to respond fully to such counterclaims. Here I focus only on one terrorist act. Yet we might consider the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as one brief case in point. While it first came to world attention through acts of terror, the PLO began to achieve its aims of territory and quasi-statehood only later, during the years of *Intifadeh* (uprising).

This youth-centered, stone-throwing protest movement against Israeli occupation engaged not in murderous, postpolitical terrorism but in highly effective political dramaturgy (Liebes 1992a, 1992b). The young Palestinian "Davids" created sympathy, not only outside Israel but also within it, for their struggle against the Israeli military "Goliaths." What eventually followed was an occasionally enthusiastic but more often resigned acceptance of the Palestinians' national ambition among influential segments of the Israel public that had been steadfast in their opposition to the PLO during its terrorist days.

A DRAMATURGICAL FRAMEWORK OF POLITICS

Despite the critical importance of politics, the difficulty that terrorism has in gaining success cannot be explained in purely instrumental terms. Success and failure in politics is not a game. It neither responds simply to available resources nor is guided exclusively by rational choice. Terrorism has a moral reference, and its understanding demands a cultural-sociological frame.

We must consider terrorism as a form not only of political but also of symbolic action. Terrorism is a particular kind of political performance. It draws blood— literally and figuratively—making use of its victims' vital fluids to throw a striking and awful painting upon the canvas of social life. It aims not only to kill but in and

through killing aims also to gesture in a dramatic way. In Austinian (1957) terms, terrorism is an illocutionary force that aims for perlocutionary effect.

Performative actions have both a manifest and latent symbolic reference.[1] Their explicit messages take shape against background structures of immanent meaning. In other words, social performances, like theatrical ones, symbolize particular meanings only because they can assume more general, taken-for-granted meaning structures within which their performances are staged. Performances select among, reorganize, and make present themes that are implicit in the immediate surround of social life—though these are absent in a literal sense. Reconfiguring the signifieds of background signifiers, performances evoke a new set of more action-specific signifiers in turn.

It is these signifiers that compose a performance's *script*. Social performance cannot be reduced to background culture. Performance is initiated because actors have particular, contingent goals. Scripts are cultural, but the reverse is not equally true: background cultures are not themselves scripts. It is not "culture" that creates scripts, but pragmatic efforts to project particular cultural meanings in pursuit of practical goals.

Scripts narrate and choreograph conflicts among the sacred, profane, and mundane. An effectively scripted narrative defines compelling protagonists and frightening antagonists and pushes them through a series of emotionally laden encounters. Such agonistic action constitutes a *plot*. Through plotted encounters, social dramas create emotional and moral effects. Their audiences may experience excitement and joy if the plots are romances or comedies, or pity and suffering if they are melodramas or tragedies. If the scripted narrative is effective and if the performance of the plot is powerful, the audience experiences catharsis, which allows new moral judgments to form and new lines of social action to be undertaken in turn.

The scripts of social dramas initially are imagined by would-be authors and agents (Turner 1982). These scripts actually might be written before a performance begins, but they also may be emergent, crystallizing only as the drama unfolds. Here, the dramas that scripts are meant to inspire aim at *audiences* composed of the publics of complex civil societies. The *actors* in these social dramas may be institutional authorities or rebels, activists or couch potatoes, political leaders or foot soldiers in social movements, or the imagined publics of engaged citizens themselves. The motivations and patterns of such actors are affected deeply, though are not controlled, by *directors*. In social dramas, these are the organizers, ideologists, and leaders of collective action (Eyerman and Jameson 1991).

Social-dramatic action can be understood, in these terms, by the theatrical concept of the *mis en scène*, literally, putting into the scene. Such dramatic enactment requires control over the means of symbolic production, which suggests a stage, a setting, and certain elementary theatrical props. For social dramas, control over such means points to the need to create platforms for performance in the public imagination and, eventually, to create access to such media of transmission as television, cinema, newspapers, radio, and the Internet.

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[1]Here I draw from a manuscript, "Cultural Pragmatics: A New Model of Social Performance," currently under review, in which I try to synthesize the pragmatic and textual dimensions of culture action. I develop a model of the different elements of social performance and discuss how these elements are fused, defused, and refused in different social situations.

THE ELEMENTS OF PERFORMATIVE SUCCESS AND FAILURE

When theatrical dramas are successful, there emerges a kind of "fusion" between these diverse elements of performance, a coming together of background meaning, actors, props, scripts, direction, and audience. Actors seem really to "be" their role. Their performances are experienced as convincing, as authentic. Audiences, sometimes literally but always figuratively, forget for the moment that they are in a theater or movie house. The performance has achieved verisimilitude, the aesthetic quality of seeming to be real.

If such triumphant fusion is not easy to produce in theater, in social performance it is that much more difficult to effect. In small societies with more simplified and integrated social organization, the social-dramatic task is less challenging than in more complex and less integrated ones. Indeed, the frequency with which performative fusion is achieved marks the centrality and effectiveness of ritual in earlier societies. Even in complex societies, however, fusion is still possible, and it frequently is achieved in settings where the elements of performances can be controlled carefully: between the faithful and their priest, rabbi, or mullah; between children and their mothers and fathers; between patients and their doctors and therapists; between motivated employees and inspiring managers; between partisan audiences and artful orators.

The more complex the society, however, the more often social performances fail to come together in convincing, seemingly authentic ways. The more that institutional and cultural resources become differentiated from one another—the more political and ideological pluralism allows conflict—the more common performative failure becomes. In complex societies, real social rituals are few and far between.

Long before postmodern philosophers declared the end of meta-narratives, the metaphysical logic that established the *telos* of performances in traditional societies began to disappear. As societies become more complex and cultures less metaphysical, the elements of social performance become contingent and more difficult to coordinate and control. Action becomes open ended, and everything can go awry. Rather than being sympathetically infused with teleological prejudice, social dramas become endemically unconvincing. Actors often seem inauthentic and manipulated, as if they are puppets and not autonomous individuals. Modern audiences tend to see power at work and not to see meaning. They attribute to would-be actors instrumental, not idealistic, motivations.

Performances may fail if any of the elements that compose them are insufficiently realized, or if the relation among these elements is not articulated in a coherent or forceful way. If there is not access to the means of symbolic production, for example, the effectiveness of the other elements goes for naught. Such failure to gain access to contemporary media might be the product of social distance, powerlessness, poverty, or of the unconvincing and unpopular dramatic content of the performance itself.

Even if productions are projected fully onto the public stage, they will fail if the roles and institutions mediating audience interpretation do so in a critical manner. Such interpretive criticism has the effect of separating dramatic intention from dramatic reception. It alienates actors from audience, defusing rather than re-fusing the elements of performance. In complex societies, critics, intellectuals, social authorities, and peer groups continuously comment upon the social-dramatic stream, as do the professional journalists who wish to appear merely to report upon it. But even if access is gained and if performances are interpreted positively, the thoroughgoing success of a performance can be thwarted if audiences are fragmented. Cultural

antagonisms and/or social cleavages can create polarized and conflicting interpretive communities. A drama that is utterly convincing for one audience-public might seem artificial to another. Insofar as group understandings of critical performances diverge, their existential and moral realities become irreconcilable.

Performative failures allow the law of unintended consequences to enter into the cultural sphere. Social dramas produce unintended interpretations; they become performative contradictions in the philosophical sense. Ambiguity replaces clarity. There is a doubleness of text. For the social dramas of complex societies, there seems always to be an absent audience alongside the putative visible one that performers themselves have in mind. The absent audience is likely to understand the performance in a manner that belies its script and the actors' and director's intentions. In this way, the total meaning of a performance is delayed. It is deferred beyond a drama's immediate reception to the audiences waiting "off stage." In complex societies, then, interpretation is marked by *différence* (Derrida 1978).

THE PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTIONS OF EAST VERSUS WEST

In the face of conservative claims about the clash of civilizations, it seems important to began by emphasizing that, while there are distinctive differences between the great monotheistic religions of the East and West, in broad comparative terms they share the same general symbolic order to a remarkable degree (cf., Lapidas 1987; Udovitch 1987; Mirsepassi 2000; Alexander 2001).

Both the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic religious traditions, which in some significant part have formed the backdrop for their intercivilizational dynamics, are dualistic and Manichean. They are relatively "this-worldly" and "ascetic" in Weber's (1978) terms, and they contain powerful egalitarian strains. Both have legitimated not only heterodox but also revolutionary movements. Finally, and most tellingly for the present case, each has developed powerful religious legitimation for just, or holy, wars. Drawing from sacred narratives of judgment, each tradition has produced ethical prophecies that legitimate violent means for holy ends, prophecies that culminate in apocalyptic visions of the pathway to paradise.[2] The dichotomies informing the complementary Eastern and Western narratives of salvation and damnation can be sketched out in this very rough way:

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[2]"Prophetic religion ... assumes the exclusiveness of a universal god and the moral depravity of unbelievers who are his adversaries and whose untroubled existence arouses his righteous indignation ... The precursor and probable model for this was the promise of the Hebrew god to his people, as understood and reinterpreted by Muhammad ... The ancient wars of the Israelite confederacy, waged under the leadership of various saviors operating under the authority Yahweh, were regarded by the tradition as holy wars. This concept of a holy war, i.e., a war in the name of a god, for the special purpose of avenging a sacrilege, which entailed putting the enemy under the ban and destroying him and all his belongings completely, is not unknown in Antiquity, particularly among the Greeks. But what was distinctive about the Hebraic concept is that the people of Yahweh, as his special community, demonstrated and exemplified their god's prestige against their foes. Consequently, when Yahweh became a universal god, Hebrew prophecy and the religion of the Psalmists created a new religious interpretation. The possession of the Promised Land, previously foretold, was supplanted by the farther-reaching promise of the elevation of Israel, as the people of Yahweh, above other nations. In the future all nations would be compelled to serve Yahweh and to lie at the feet of Israel. On this model Muhammad constructed the commandment of the holy war involving the subjugation of the unbelievers to political authority and economic domination of the faithful ... The religion of the medieval Christian orders of celibate knights, particularly the Templars ... were first called into being during the Crusades against Islam and ... corresponded to the Islamic warrior orders" (Weber 1978: 473–75).

Sacred/Friend	Profane/Enemy
Peaceful	Violent
Cooperative	Antagonistic
Honest	Deceitful
Equal	Dominating
Rational	Irrational
Solidarity	Fractious
Ethical	Instrumental
Honorable	Corrupt
Faithful	Cynical

If the same semiotic code supplies the signifiers for the sacred political actions in both religious and civilizational traditions, why do groups representing these civilizations stand today in such dangerous conflict? The reason is that mediated through a series of historical developments, the signifieds of these signifiers have become strikingly, even fatefully, different. The Christian Crusades, the geopolitics of the Mogul and Ottoman Empires, the military triumphs of European empire—through such historical developments as these, the shared signifiers of the great monotheistic religions became connected with concrete signifieds that conveyed not their mutual understanding of the sacred and profane but extraordinary cultural difference and social antagonism. Over the long course of historical time, and with tragic and sometimes terrifying consequences, there gradually emerged the pronounced tendency for the Islamic and Judeo-Christian religio-political civilizations to embody evil for each other. What has developed is a self-reinforcing system of cultural-cum-social polarization, in which the sacralizing social dramas of one side have been the polluting dramas of the other.

From the mid-20th century, this system of performative contradiction has been fueled by such proximate social and political developments as Israeli statehood; the failure of Pan-Arabism and economic modernization in the regions of the Islamic crest; the increasing relative and often absolute impoverishment of what once was called the third world; the globalization of capital markets and the undermining of national sovereignty; the rise of feminist movements; American displacement of France and Britain as the preeminent capitalist and military power; and the end of the bipolar world and the emergence of America's asymmetrical military, cultural, and economic position.

At every point, these economic and political developments were mediated, channeled, and crystallized by the background codes and narratives that polarized the East and West as cultural-political regions. The religious orientations that East and West share in the most general comparative terms were so refracted by social history that mutual misunderstanding became the norm. Indeed, what has remained constant through the twists and turns of contingent events is the polarizing cultural logic that forms a background to them. The social performances on one side are misperceived by audiences on the other. Even when Western actors are scripted and are played as sincere protagonists, they pass fluidly, artfully, and authentically into the position of antagonists in the scripts that emerge from the perceptions of the "Eastern" side. At the same time, when Islamic scripts portray Eastern actors as protagonists in leading roles, they are easily reinterpreted as antagonistic "others" in the eyes of Western audiences.

There is no better illustration of this performative contradiction than the *jihad*. Created as a violent means for religious-cum-political purification within medieval Islam (Black 2001), the *jihad* was applied to Western occupiers in a later historical time (Kepel 2002). For its Islamic practitioners and key sections of Islamic audiences, this modern *jihad* is viewed as a sacred and highly demanding performance of holy war. For its non-Islamic victims and audience, the performance of *jihad* is interpreted in precisely the opposite manner, as an authentic demonstration of the polluted and demonic qualities of Islam itself.

The most recent and most highly consequential emplotments on this tragic contra-puntal culture structure resulted from American performances in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the Gulf War in the 1990s. The Afghan war, despite its apparent triumph for the West, marked a failed performance, for it unintentionally produced an anti-Western understanding in a significant segment of its audience. Having helped Islamic insurgents dislodge the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a defeat that significantly contributed to the larger project of destabilizing the Communist "evil empire," the United States declared victory and withdrew. This triumphal exit was interpreted as typical Western indifference by the national and religious formations that framed the anti-Soviet war from their own, radically different point of view. This construction of Jewish-Christian-American infidelity is what generated the first wave of organized anti-American *jihad*, a vicious and determined counterperformance.

The interpretation of the Gulf War and its aftermath followed a similar pattern. Presented to Western audiences as a virtuous war of liberation, it merely served to confirm Western deceit and aggression to groups of radical Islamic nationalists. The postwar United Nations (UN) treaty, which allowed Iraq continued sovereignty while sharply curtailing its economic and military freedom, was regarded widely at the time of the war's conclusion as reasonably motivated and humane in its concerns. During the course of the 1990s, however, the treaty provisions—and the treaty's steadfast and aggressive American and British guarantors—came to be regarded, first by radical Islamic groups in the region and subsequently by many humanitarian agencies and critical intellectuals around the world, as selfish, militaristic, and even orientalist. Once again, the unintended consequences of performative action had intensified the polarizing understandings of earlier misinterpretations. These audience reactions inspired Islamic radicals to engage in new and even more destructive counterperformances in turn.

These tragic misperformances recall another war-ending misinterpretation that became, equally unwittingly, a war-starting one. When the triumphant Allies wrote the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, their strategic aim was to secure a long-term international peace. But the treaty negotiations, and the final document, were also scripts that allowed leaders to project performances to their French, American, and British audiences back home. Not surprisingly, German audiences read these performances in a very different manner. Eventually, a talented but malevolent Austrian political actor wrote a new script for holy war and directed Germany's tragic performance in it. The Western world has come to rue that day.

INITIAL SUCCESS: BIN LADEN ASSEMBLES THE PERFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF TERROR

Osama bin Laden was another world-historical actor who would lead another "people" in counterperformance against the West in another time. Like that other infamous but highly effective demagogue before him, bin Laden responded to the

social despair and the moldering anger that marked significant segments of his home audience—in this case an Arab-Islamic, not a German, one.[3] Activist in the anti-Soviet holy war and embittered and impotent observer of the Western occupation of Saudi Arabia during and after the Gulf War, bin Laden proved himself to be enormously effective in staging the next phase of the contrapuntal performance cycle of East versus West. He imagined how a new kind of performance could be staged in the conditions of today. His innovation was to turn terrorism into mass murder and to place this counterperformance on the world stage. Bin Laden not only imagined himself as the protagonist of a massively organized and globally televised *jihad*, but he also had the awful artfulness and the personal resources to actually place himself in the center of the real thing.

Because bin Laden was rich and well connected, he possessed the resources to hire "actors" for a vastly larger terrorist organization than ever had been put together before, and he also had the networks to find possible actors and to interview them before allowing them to join his production teams. But more than resources were involved. Bin Laden was charismatic and creative. He had a real feeling for the story line, the traditional Islamic agonistic that plotted virtuous al-Qaeda heroes fighting for their sacred honor against villainous Americans with money in their hearts and blood on their hands. This cunning director established secret training camps that allowed back-stage rehearsals for the public performances to come. In these protected spaces, fresh recruits were coached on how they could assume the parts assigned to them faithfully and convincingly in the al-Qaeda script. When the new "method" could be assumed with utter authenticity, the actor-terrorists were released into "performance teams," which secretly prepared for the full-dress production of martyrdom in Western lands.[4]

But perhaps what most distinguished bin Laden was his ability to command the means of symbolic production. He needed a worldwide stage and means for murder on a scale far larger, and more dramaturgically compelling, than he ever before had

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[3]"We—with God's help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim *ulema*, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson. The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Holy Mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim" (1997 CNN interview, excerpts taken from "*Osama bin Laden v. the U.S*: Edicts and Statements," www.pbs.org/frontline, quoted in Bernstein 2002:90.)

[4]"Bin Laden organized a network of about a dozen different training camps ... Each *mujahid*, or holy warrior, was given a code name so that even his fellow recruits generally did not know his real name ... The training ... was accompanied by steady infusions of Islamic fervor, in the form of Koran study, movies, lectures, and pamphlets. There was great stress on the glory of giving one's life for Allah, and the two greatest prohibitions [were] called 'love of the world' and 'hatred of death.' A key slogan was 'In time of war there is no death'" (Bernstein 2002:86). "One of the pieces missing in the reconstruction of the September 11 plot," Bernstein later comments (Bernstein 2002:145), "is the training in hijackings while they were in the United States." Did the terror-performers have "at their disposal mock-ups of passenger aircraft interiors where they could have gone through dress rehearsals"? While "it is possible," of course, "that they dispensed with such rehearsals, and simply made their plans on the basis of what they knew of the interiors of Boeing 767s from having been passengers on them," Bernstein suggests it "would seem more likely that the hijackers would have preferred to do some serious practice."

The terrorists did have a sheet of final instructions, evidently prepared by Mohammed Atta, about how to prepare themselves just before the performance began. The night before, they were to shave their bodies of excess hair and to read *Al Tawba* and *Anfal*, the war chapters in the Koran. The goal was to control the inner self so that it would not interfere with their performative role.

Remind your soul to listen and obey ... purify, convince it, make it understand, and incite it ... and do not fight among yourselves or else you will fail. And be patient, for God is with the patient. When the confrontation begins, srike like champions who do not want to go back to this world. Shout "Allah'u Akbar" because this strikes fear in the hearts of the nonbelievers. (Bernstein 2002:173)

been able to acquire. His demonic genius was to teach his would-be martyrs yet another role—that of student-visitors to America who were eager to learn to fly the big planes. Once the actor-terrorists possessed this skill, they could commandeer passenger jets that already were inside the American staging area. With these props, the martyr-terrorists could attack and could try to destroy the symbols of polluted power that were central to the emotional dynamics of their script. If they were fortunate, they also could kill thousands of Americans, and other Westerns, who were outside the passenger plane. If this occurred, then the bin Laden performance of *jihad* would possess the widest possible public stage.

As the world learned at 9:03 a.m. on September 11, 2001, bin Laden's performance of mass terror unfolded with barely a hitch. It created a shocking narrative of gothic horror that unfolded, in agonizing and simultaneous detail, before an audience of hundreds of millions. The terrorist-martyr-actors succeeded in destroying polluted icons of modern American capitalism, the Twin Towers, which evocatively symbolized their atheistic Western enemy. The terrorist performances created not only unprecedented physical destruction and loss of life but also moral humiliation and emotional despair, and they captured the world's media attention for days on end.

In purely sociological terms—which for the sake of analysis must bracket normative considerations—this performance surely marked an extraordinary achievement. So many personnel and so much materiel had to be organized and directed. The scripts had to be refined so continuously. The terrorists' method acting had to be sustained so continuously. So many failures were possible, yet in the end, the play went on.

THE AUDIENCE RESPONDS: JOY AND DESPAIR AS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TERROR-PERFORMANCE

Yes, the play went on, but with what result? Did the performance have its intended effect? Was the plot, when enacted, perceived as martyrdom for a just cause? Did the physical destruction lead beyond immediate social instability and chaos to political imbalance and moral delegitimation? Destabilization is both objective and subjective. Emotions are coded and regulated symbolically; the objects of cathexis simply are not felt but simultaneously are understood. Because traumas are subject to interpretation, different background understandings led to different reactions and, eventually, to different paths for recovery.

Such considerations point to the fragmentation that marks contemporary societies. If the elements of artful staging are defused, and are difficult to bring successfully together, so indeed is the audience. In most public events, in fact, there are many different audiences, and their reactions to the same event often are framed by fiercely incompatible scripts. It was the failure to understand the separation of audience from performance—and the fragmentation of these separated audiences into different and often hermetically sealed interpretive spaces—that made the initial success of the terrorist *jihad* so short lived and the response to it at most only a partial success.

The events on that morning of September 11 played before profoundly different viewing groups. Many Arab-Islamic audiences hailed the performances with great applause. The Arab streets, it was reported authoritatively, sometimes danced with joy. Among Arab elites, emails of satisfaction and triumph were passed quietly. Among these groups, real performative fusion was obtained in the destruction's immediate wake. Terrorists were perceived as martyrs who had gone on to their heavenly reward. The infidels had been punished, and Allah would treat them, too, in an appropriate way. As the producer and director of this world-historical drama, and

indeed as its protagonist-at-a-distance, Osama bin Linden became an object of extra-ordinarily intense identification. He was lionized as a hero, mythologized in an instant. His likeness was emblazed on T-shirts that were displayed like totemic images on human bodies. Recordings of his triumphant words were reproduced and continuously replayed on video and compact disc. The fusion among script, performance, actors, and audience was indeed impressively achieved.[5] But what about the other audience?

When *jihad* emerged in medieval Islamic society, its success did not depend on wide audience response. Success required only the performance assassination itself. Because social structure and culture were simpler and more integrated, the *jihad* message was readable, clearly and directly, from the act. In complex global society, nothing can be further from the truth.

At first, however, it appeared that the American audience might react in a manner consistent with al-Qaeda's script. As the drama unfolded, Western viewers witnessed objective destruction and experienced fears of personal annihilation and of the center giving way. The unimaginable destruction of giant buildings and the vicarious experience of mutilation and violent death were palpable, shocking, and psychologically debilitat-ing. Because Western viewers identified with those who were attacked, they experienced the injuries as if they were attacks on their own buildings, bodies, and minds.

That the jaws of destruction had opened and the final days were at hand were powerful experiences in the immediate aftermath of the terror. Images of just punish-ment, of hell and damnation, are deep and recurrent themes in the Western imagin-ation, and images of the New York City crash site were framed by aesthetic archetypes of apocalypse that recalled the late medieval paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. Dust blotted out the sun. Day turned to night. People caught on fire, suffocated, and jumped to their death. Hysteria and wild screaming were recorded and were transmitted world-wide. Strong men cried; firefighters and guards and policemen were brought to their knees, and they died in abject confusion, gasping for air. In the towers above, rich and powerful men and women waited helplessly, their sophisticated machines useless, and they died in even greater numbers. Unable to evoke an explicitly religious framework, commentators and observers evoked metaphors of the long-feared nightmare of nuclear holocaust to describe the scene, and they soon named the crash site "Ground Zero."

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[5]A videotape discovered by American forces in Afghanistan in the months after 9/11 allowed Western audiences to became privy to bin Laden's own response to the 9/11 terrorist performance and to his close associates' comments about the broadcast of other Arab-Islamic reactions as well. It constituted, in this sense, the genre of a "play within a play."

A few weeks after the attacks, bin Laden was with some of his close aides and a visitor from Saudi Arabia, and, sitting on a rug, relaxing with their backs leaning against the wall behind them, they expressed joy at the extent of the destruction, and they made jokes ... about the events of September 11.

"The TV broadcast the big event," said Sulaiman Abou-Ghaith, a radical Kuwaiti cleric who served as a close adviser to bin Laden. "The scene was showing an Egyptian family sitting in their living room. They exploded with joy. Do you know when there is a soccer game and your team wins? It was the same expression of joy."

"A plane crashing into a tall building was out of anyone's imagination," the visitor from Saudi Arabia put in. "This was a great job" ... He was Khaled al-Harbi, a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya who had lost his legs in combat.

"It was 5:30 p.m. our time," bin Laden said. "Immediately, we heard the news that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. We turned the radio station to the news from Washington. The news continued and there was no mention of the attack until the end. At the end of the newscast, they reported that a plane just hit the World Trade Center."

The visiting sheik interrupted to give a kind of religious sanction to the happy news. "Allah be praised," he intoned ...

Bin Laden continued his account of how he experienced September 11. "After a little while," he said, "they announced that another plane had hit the World Trade Center. The brothers who heard the news were overjoyed by it." (Bernstein 2002:9–10)

Not only physical but also ontological security was threatened, and there was a specifically American dimension as well. For in the country's collective imagination, America remained a virgin land (Smith 1950), a shining beacon on a protected hill. It also was imagined as a fortress that foreigners would forever be unable to breach. Indeed, the nation's sacred soil had not been stained with American blood since the middle of the second century before.

The innocent honor of this mythical America stood in grave danger of being polluted on this day. Fear stalked the land. Americans were reluctant to project themselves into their environments. There was a real and immediate deflation of generalized social trust. People stopped driving, stayed away from public transportation, and failed to show up for work. The stock market dipped sharply, and deposits were withdrawn from banks. Tourism evaporated, and pleasure traveling disappeared.

These early American reactions, projected worldwide as denouement to the initial performative act, provided some Arab-Islamic audiences with evidence that the terrorist activity had succeeded not only in its immediate but also in its ultimate aims. These initial impressions were justifiable, but they eventually proved incorrect. The structural conditions for fusion proved impossible to overcome, and bin Laden's terrorist performance would be as subject to misinterpretation as those actions that America once had initiated on its own. The fragmentation of media and critics was a social fact; so were the polarized background meanings that structured the audiences for the terrorist performance on a global scale. The contrapuntal logic of East-West confrontation continued, and there emerged counterreadings that eventually generated counterperformances.

BIN LADEN MISPERFORMS: AMERICAN COUNTERREADING AND IDEALIZATION

What was heroism for one audience was terrorism for the other. In fact, the terrorist pollution and destruction of American core symbols produced, within large segments of the American audience, a one-sided idealization in turn of everything American. This idealization began almost immediately, became stronger in the hours and days after the event, and worked itself out at many different levels of social structure and cultural life. It marked the beginnings of a counterreading that provided the script for the counterperformance that continues today.

This counterreading allowed the nightmare story of terrorist destruction to be retold—by critics, commentators, and reporters; by victims, helpers, and sideline observers; and by political, social, and intellectual leaders who were the once and future directors of American action on the world stage. For themselves and for their audiences of listeners, viewers, and readers, these groups recast the humbling and fearful destruction of America as an ennobling narrative, one that revealed the strength of an ideal American core.[6] The existence of this inner, spiritual core was

[6]These recastings were not reported as constructions but were presented as actual accounts, as objective descriptions and objective rememberings. This ambiguity, how the implicit social role of journalism in such liminal situations contradicts its explicit professional ethics, is revealed nicely in the Forward written by the executive editor of the *New York Times*, Howell Raines, to *Out of the Blue: The Story of September 11, 2001: From Jihad to Ground Zero*, authored by a *Times* journalist and based on the staff's reporting of the previous year.

> As daily journalists, of course, we do not set about our work with the idea of being teachers or moral historians. We are engaged in an intellectual enterprise built around bringing quality information to an engaged and demanding readership. Sometimes that means writing what some have called the first rough draft of history. Sometimes it also means constructing a memorial to those whose courage and sacrifice we have recorded or—to speak more precisely—erecting a foundation of information upon which our readers can construct their own historical overviews, their own memorials to those who are lost and to the struggle to preserve democratic values. (Bernstein 2002:x)

asserted in a matter-of-fact way, as if it had to do neither with metaphysics nor metaphor but was a matter of self-evident, natural truth. "The fire is still burning, but from it has emerged a stronger spirit," remarked New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani when he led a memorial service at the site one month later. Following upon a series of deeply structured symbolic antitheses—ideal and material, soul and body, light and dark, truth and falsehood—Americans described the terrorist destruction as having an effect only on external, physical forms. The ideal inner core of America was still intact; indeed, as a result of the effort at destruction, this core actually had grown stronger than ever before. Rather than being threatened or destroyed, the social center was being reconstituted as an ideal and not as a material thing. Because the center of society existed in the imagination, in the nation's soul, it certainly would be rematerialized in the days ahead.

This counterreading of the terrorist performance took leave from the mundane vagaries of time and place, from the dust, grime, and blood that marked the physical terrorist site. It constituted a new imaginary that created an alternative, a liminal time and space, an existential zone located in the collective consciousness, not in the material world. The new time was symbolized as a new calendrical date, 9/11, a numerical sequence referring literally to an emergency call but whose pragmatic meaning was transformed into an iconic marker of time. After September 11, it was remarked con- tinuously, "Nothing has ever been the same." The new beginning, in other words, marked the beginning of a new world.[7] Transcendent rather than geographic, this new world would fill in and would smooth over the crater that threatened the center of American life.

Before 9/11, America had been fractured by social cleavages, by the normal incivilities attendant on social complexity, and even, on occasion, by unspeakable hostilities. After 9/11, the national community experienced and interpreted itself as united by feeling, marked by the loving kindness displayed among persons who once only had been friends, and by the civility and solicitude among those who once merely had been strangers. There was an intense generalization of social attention, which shifted away from specificity, concreteness, and idiosyncrasy to abstraction, idealiz- ation, and universality.[8] This idealizing emotional and moral framework spread from the physical to the social world, from the individual to the collectivity, from the family to the business community, from the city of New York to the American nation, and from the fate of the American nation to (Western) civilization itself.

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[7]For a discussion of "new beginning" as a metaphorical construction that allows consensual commitment and social reform, see Edles's (1998) reconstruction of this image as one of the core representations that allowed the Spanish transition to democracy in post-Franco Spain.

[8]Thousands of examples of such generalization and abstraction can be culled from the communicative media in the days, weeks, and months that followed 9/11.The nuanced ways in which this idealization functioned as a medium for identification and solidary-extension would be well worth the effort at hermeneutic reconstruction. A single quotation, merely as illustration, will have to suffice here. As the one-year anniversary of the tragedy approached, a flood of books appeared, written by some of the same journalists who initially had reported the events in the daily news media. The generalization and memorialization that formed the contents of these books then were condensed further and were broadcast to a much larger audience by the short book reviews published in the daily media in turn. Under the headline "On a Hijacked Airliner, Moments of Moral Clarity," the following paragraph appeared in a review of a book-length account of the passengers on United Flight 98, who evidently were able to overwhelm the hijackers and to prevent a fourth terrorist conflagration.

> Heroism is rarely the province of kings. This certainly emerged as a lesson in the many acts of courage we saw on Sept. 11, and it is a sustaining message within the story of the men and women who helped bring down United Flight 98 in the woods of Pennsylvania that day, on the one hijacking mission that failed to strike an intended target. The passengers and crew members were "ordinary" men and women who remind us again that no one, in fact, is ordinary; they saved innumerable other lives and contributed to our sense in the midst of that tragedy that as capable as we humans are of destruction, we are even more reliably capable of love, dedication, and sacrifice. (*New York Times* August 29, 2002:E5)

Before September 11, the giant Twin Towers that struck upward from the bottom of Manhattan were perceived routinely, were taken for granted as mundane physical objects. If they were noticed at all, it was for their ugliness and vulgarity and for the intrusive and almost aggressive manner in which they towered over lower Manhattan life, overshadowing, it was sometimes said, the light of "Lady Liberty" herself. By the very act of their destruction, however, the towers moved from the mundane and profane to the sacred of symbolic life. They were re-presented as having embodied not capitalism but enterprise; not the bourgeois but the cosmopolitan; not private property but public democracy. They were reconstructed retrospectively as their architects once idealistically had envisioned them, as cool icons of aesthetic modernism, symbols of economic energy that were deemed now to have been compatible fully with the famous statue that represented political freedom in the harbor beyond.

If these physical containers were transformed in the American imagination, so much more so were the maimed and murdered people whom these buildings once contained. Before 9/11, the merchants and traders of Wall Street often had been the objects of envy and resentment, maligned as selfish and indulgent, as a new and unattractively yuppified social class. In America's fiercely fought, even if largely symbolic, class war, no group launched such critical salvos more fiercely than the often resentful remnants of America's skilled working class, largely white, ethnic, and male. Yet they themselves also were frequent objects of popular disdain, ridiculed as macho and racist, as unlettered, beer-drinking, red-necked conservatives too quick to wrap themselves in the American flag. It was this class who composed the larger part of the firefighters and police officers who entered the Twin Towers in the ill-fated efforts to help the elites who worked in the floors above.

As they perished, the members of both groups were transformed symbolically. They were made innocent and good, were portrayed in a mythical manner that abstracted from their particular qualities of gender, class, race, or ethnicity.

The first-place level of transfiguration focused on the victims and participants as archetypal individuals *tout court*. In the magazines, televisions, and newspaper elegies that were composed about them, which indeed amounted to commemorations, in the weeks and months after the tragic event, the traders and firemen, secretaries and police became the heroic subjects in sentimental, often heart-wrenching stories about their pluck and their determination. Their highly genred (Bakhtin 1986) biographies revealed that the strength, dedication, and kindness of the innocents murdered on September 11 allowed each one to build a meaningful and coherent life.

The second level of idealized reconstruction focused on the family. Whatever sociological statistics might have to say about divorce and loneliness, absent fathers and latch-key children, abandoned wives and extramarital affairs, the now mythically reconstructed individuals who perished on 9/11 were represented as members of warm and loving families. They were devoted husbands and wives, attentive mothers and fathers, loyal children and grandparents. Their familial love was always constant, vivid, and pure.

The third level of transfiguration concerned the economic elite itself. The highly profitable, often cutthroat, and relentlessly competitive business enterprises who rented space in the Twin Towers were represented as decent, entirely human enterprises. They made an honest living, and their industry contributed to the bounty of American life. Their employees often had risen from rags to riches, and they were, by ethnicity, taste, and personal life, no different in any important way than any other participant in American life. On the day after 9/11, Cable News Network (CNN) interviewed the president of the investment firm Cantor Fitzgerald, all of whose

employees in the World Trade Center had died. In the course of recounting his company's tragedy, this powerful businessman broke down and wept in a pitiable way. This scene was remarked upon throughout the world. It was the human face of 9/11's American side: it was a sign that the terrorists had targeted human life, not the West or some abstraction of modernity and capitalism. It was also a demonstration that the humanity the terrorists had tried to destroy somehow had managed to survive.

From this transformation of degraded and antagonistic economic classes into idealized images of individual, family, and enterprise, the generalization of solidary feelings expanded like a ripple from a stone that had been thrown into the middle of a tranquil pond. New York City often had been portrayed as a dirty, angry, and competitive place, the epicenter of the cutthroat, impersonal cosmopolitanism that conservative Americans loved to hate. After 9/11, it was presented as a prototypically human place. It was a living organism attacked by virulent foreign bodies, and it was fighting for its life. Residents of small towns sent messages not just of condolence but also of identification. "Arkansas Prays for You" and "Southwest Airlines Loves NYC" were messages scrawled at the wreckage site. One Midwestern town raised money for a replacement fire engine, and others for new earth-moving machines.[9] Hundreds of Americans swiftly traveled to the city and joined volunteer brigades to clean up and to purify the damaged area and to help those who had been traumatized by the events. Europeans publicly pronounced their love and affection for this quintessentially American city and expressed alarm over its injury. New York City became the center of the ideal core, concentrating within itself the spirit, energy, and openness to difference that made America the "land of the free and the home of the brave."

These gestures of identification toward the center from the peripheries had the reciprocal effect of strengthening national and supra-national solidarity in turn. While it was only one part of New York City that was injured, and only 2,813 particular persons who perished within it, the news headlined an attack on "America," and ordinary citizens everywhere expressed themselves with the plural first-person pronoun "we." In the long aftermath of 9/11, during the period of the new beginning, it was not uncommon for this identification to expand outside of the American nation as well. In the first year of the Bush Administration, there had been increasing hostility and separateness between America and Europe. After 9/11, the German prime minister proclaimed, "We are all Americans now." The reciprocal bonds that connect Europe and the United States were reasserted idealistically, and the moral debt from World War II was repaid symbolically. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) declared its determination to defend America, as if to underscore the bond of extranational, shared civilization itself. Once again Europeans and Americans were united under a great cause to fight for the common good, but this time the unity was wider, for it extended to Germany and Russia and Japan.

FROM COUNTERSCRIPT TO COUNTERPERFORMANCE: THE "WAR AGAINST TERRORISM" AND BEYOND

Osama bin Laden's terrorist performance had achieved physical destruction and social instability, and it briefly threatened to disrupt the nation's political life. But it

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[9]"In Normal, Illinois, three local radio stations set up a tent in front of Schnucks Supermarket on Veterans' Parkway to collective donations in five-gallon water bottles—and the money came in at the rate of $5,000 per hour" (Bernstein 2002:247–48).

did not achieve terrorism's most significant goal, which has to do with the moral delegitimation of the regime itself. This performative turn seemed to have taken the director, bin Laden, by surprise, and certainly it must have disappointed him deeply. According to the binaries of his background script, if al-Qaeda was strong and pure, then Americans were soft and corrupt, their regime democratic only in the formal sense. Convinced of their weak motives, devious relations, and corrupt institutions, bin Laden believed that neither Americans nor their government would be able to respond politically, socially, or morally to his perfectly executed script.[10] In fact, however, the effect of al-Qaeda's performance was the very opposite from the one it had hoped to achieve. Rather than moral destabilization, there was revivification. Osama bin Laden's terrorism was performed before a fragmented and polarized audience, and it produced a reading counter to those intended by the terrorist-actors themselves.

This counterreading led to a new militarization of America, and later to a new war that would destroy al-Qaeda's national-territorial base. The cultural-sociological processes described here were causes to these more material effects. The new solidarity that developed in reaction to 9/11 deepened the divisions that had produced it. The idealization of America and the West was constructed in relation to an equally powerful stigmatization of everything not it. The new national unity produced a new global polarity at the same time. The counterreading had created an idealized and powerful protagonist, and it demanded an equally threatening antagonist in turn. Without it, there would be no tension to the plot, and the redemption of the moral actors would not be allowed to unfold realistically. Purification demanded pollution, and salvation required revenge. The discourse of friends and enemies was ready at hand. The terrorists were constructed as bitter and frustrated, as marginal, as weak and cowardly human beings. They were monsters, not men, and their actions had no principled rationale.

Against such sinister creatures the only appropriate response was force, for they could not be reasoned with but only suppressed. "None of us will forget this day," President Bush told the nation on the evening of September 11, "yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world" (quoted in Woodward 2002:30). There must be a war against terror. The terrorists were evildoers. "We haven't seen this kind of barbarism in a long period of time," the president later remarked (Woodward 2002:94). He added, "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while." But it was not only a matter of recalling from the fog of memory the Christian campaigns against the Muslim usurpers of earlier times. Fiercely virtuous military campaigns had defended Republican regimes against "despotic" invaders from Athens to Florence to the beaches at Normandy (Hanson 2001).

Will the war against terrorism succeed? Will it not produce inevitably another counterperformance in turn? Even the most successful of the Crusades failed to roll back Islam's energetic expansion, much less its theological-political self-regard. Terrorism produces wars against it, and crusades produce *jihads* in turn. Contingent actions taken in freedom reaffirm the binding structures of contrapuntal plot. Perhaps

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[10]In one of his commentary videotapes released after September 11 by the Arabic television station Al-Jazeera, bin Laden prematurely equated the physical destruction of American buildings and the horror Americans experienced with the destruction of the heart of the American social organism, that is, with "America" in a social and moral sense:

> Here is America struck by Almighty God in one of its vital organs so that its greatest buildings are destroyed ... America has been filled with horror from north to south and east to west, and thanks be to God ... God has used a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America." (quoted in Bernstein 2002:252–53)

this logic of performance and counterperformance has not been appreciated fully yet by the leaders of either side.

With the arrival of the "Age of Terror" (Talbot and Chanda 2002), the power to initiate the newest phase in the contrapuntal cycle has moved from West to East. But the *mis en scène* has not been altered. Islamic terrorism is a dramatic gesture, the Western response to it a dramatic misunderstanding. These Islamic and Western scripts fuel iterative sequences of misperformance.[11] Unless the cycle is broken, it will undermine the prospects for social stability and international understanding and, for many unfortunate persons, the very right to life.

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[11]The run-up to the second Iraqi war constitutes the iteration most recently preceding the time when the present article went into press. On record for insisting that "events aren't moved by blind chance" but by "the hand of a just and faithful God," U.S. President George W. Bush justified the American-led invasion of Iraq in his January 2003 State of the Union address: "We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them ... This call of history has come to the right country" (Lears 2003). Two weeks later, the spiritual leader of the Palestinian group Hamas, which initiated the strategy of suicide terrorism in Israel and the West Bank, instructed Muslims around the world to retaliate in the event of an American attack. Describing the imminent invasion as "a crusader's war" against Islam by "the envious West and the U.S. first among them," he insisted that, "as they fight us, we have to fight them" (Benet 2003). The day before the actual conflict began, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein described war with the United States as "the decisive battle between the army of faith, right and justice, and the forces of tyranny and American-Zionist savagery on the other." Declaring himself a "jihadist," he called for a "holy war" that would "wipe out the ranks" of the invading American troops (Tyler 2003).

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