1

THE STATE, THE SPECTACLE, AND SEPTEMBER 11

He too fought under television for our place in the sun.

—Robert Lowell on Lieutenant Calley, 1971

We begin from the moment in February 2003, with the run-up to war in Iraq entering its final stages, when the copy of Picasso's *Guernica* hung in the anteroom to the UN Security Council Chamber was curtained over, at American insistence – not "an appropriate backdrop", it was explained, for official statements to the world media. The episode became an emblem. Many a placard on Piccadilly and Las Ramblas rang sardonic changes on Bush and the snorting bull. An emblem, yes – but, with the benefit of hindsight, emblematic of what? Of the state's relentless will to control the minutiae of appearance, as part of – essential to – its drive to war? Well, certainly. But in this case, did it get its way? Did not the boorishness of the effort at censorship prove counterproductive, eliciting the very haunting – by an imagery still capable of putting a face on the brutal abstraction of "shock and awe" – that the velcro covering was meant to put a stop to? And did not the whole incident speak above all to the state's *anxiety* as it tried to micromanage the means of symbolic production – as if it feared that every last detail of the derealized decor it had built for its citizens had the potential, at a time of crisis, to turn utterly against it?

These are the ambiguities, generalized to the whole conduct of war and

politics over the past four years, that this chapter aims to explore. We start from the premise that certain concepts and descriptions put forward forty years ago by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, as part of their effort to comprehend the new forms of state control and social disintegration then emerging, still possess explanatory power – more so than ever, we suspect, in the poisonous epoch we are living through. In particular, the twinned notions of "the colonization of everyday life" and "the society of the spectacle" – we think each concept needs the other if either is to do its proper work – strike us as having purchase on key aspects of what has happened since September 11, 2001. Our purpose, in a word, is to turn two central Situationist hypotheses back to the task for which they were always primarily intended – to make them instruments of political analysis again, directed to an understanding of the powers and vulnerabilities of the capitalist state. (We take it we are not alone in shuddering at the way "spectacle" has taken its place in approved postmodern discourse over the past fifteen years – as a vaguely millenarian accompaniment to "new media studies" or to wishful thinking about freedom in cyberspace, with never a whisper that its original objects were the Watts Riots and the Proletarian Cultural Revolution.)

None of this means that we think we comprehend the whole shape and dynamic of the new state of affairs, or can offer a theory of its deepest determinants. We are not sectaries of the spectacle; no one concept, or cluster of concepts, seems to us to get the measure of the horror of the past four years. We even find it understandable, if in the end a mistake, that some on the Left have seen the recent wars in the desert and squabbles in the Security Council as open to analysis in classical Marxist terms, proudly unreconstructed – bringing on stage again the predictions and revulsions of Lenin's and Hobson's studies of imperialism – rather than in those of a politics of "internal", technologized social control.[7]

7 This is not meant to signal that we believe that all the key terms of Marx's analysis have outlived their usefulness. Our discussion of "primitive accumulation" has already indicated

This much we are sure of. What is new in the current dark circumstance still largely eludes analysis. Any such analysis is obliged to begin from three obvious, interlinked questions of the moment, which now we set out in tabular form:

- To what extent did the events of September 11, 2001 – the precision bombing of New York and Washington by organized enemies of the US empire – usher in a new era? Did those events change anything fundamental in the calculus and conduct of advanced capitalist states, or in the relation of such states to their civil societies? If so, how?
- Are we to understand the forms of assertion of American power since September 11 – the hasty demonstration of military supremacy (largely to reassure the demonstrators, one feels, that "something could still be done" with the monstrous armory at the state's beck and call), the blundering attempts at recolonization under way in Afghanistan and Iraq, the threats and payoffs to client states in every corner of the globe, the glowering attack on civil liberties within the US itself – as a step backward, *an historical regression*, in which the molecular, integral, invisible means of control which so many of us believed were indispensable to a truly "modern" state-system have given way to a new/old era of gunboats and book-burning?
- Do the concepts "society of the spectacle" and "colonization of everyday life" help us to grasp the logic of the present age? Or has the level of social dispersal and mendaciousness to which those concepts once pointed also been overtaken – displaced, abruptly, at a special moment of urgency and arrogance – by cruder, older imperatives of statecraft?

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the contrary. It is the "proudly unreconstructed" that is the point at issue here. Too many Marxist commentators lately have struck us as a touch smug (or is it relieved?) in the face of the new imperialism, as if it validated the whole panoply of Marxist explanations, and put all others in the shade.

None of these questions, to repeat, can be answered in isolation. No one level of analysis – "economic" or "political", global or local, focusing on the means of either material or symbolic production – will do justice to the current strange mixture of chaos and grand design. But one main aspect of the story – the struggle for mastery in the realm of the image – has so far been barely thought of as *positively interacting* with others more familiar and "material". It is the first outline of this interaction we aim to offer, for further debate.

I

The version of "spectacle" with which we operate is minimal, pragmatic, and matter of fact. No doubt the idea's original author often gave it an exultant, world-historical force. But his tone is inimitable, as all efforts to duplicate it have proven; and in any case we are convinced that the age demands a different cadence – something closer (if we are lucky) to that of the lines from *Paradise Lost* we use as our epigraph than to anything from Lukács or Ducasse.

The notion "spectacle" was intended, then, as a first stab at characterizing a new form of, or stage in, the accumulation of capital. What it named preeminently was the submission of more and more facets of human sociability – areas of everyday life, forms of recreation, patterns of speech, idioms of local solidarity, kinds of ethical or aesthetic insubordination, the endless capacities of human beings to evade or refuse the orders brought down to them from on high – to the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market. Those who developed the analysis in the first place resisted the idea that this colonization of everyday life was dependent on any one set of technologies, but notoriously they were interested in the means modern societies have at their disposal to systematize and disseminate appearances, and to subject the texture of day-to-day living to a constant

barrage of images, instructions, slogans, logos, false promises, virtual realities, miniature happiness-motifs. Batteries Not Included, as the old punk band had it.

The choice of the word "colonization" to describe the process was deliberate. It invited readers to conceive of the invasion and sterilizing of so many unoccupied areas of human species-being – areas that previous regimes, however overweening, had chosen (or been obliged) to leave alone – *as a specific necessity of capitalist production*, just as much part of its dynamism as expansion to the ends of the earth. The colonization of everyday life, we might put it from our present vantage point, was "globalization" turned inward – mapping and enclosing the hinterland of the social, and carving out from the detail of human inventiveness an ever more ramified and standardized market of exchangeable subjectivities. Naturally the one colonization implied the other: there would have been no Black Atlantic of sugars, alcohols, and opiates without the drive to shape subjectivity into a pattern of small (saleable) addictions.

The point of the analysis, again, was to bring into focus the terms and possibilities of resistance (wars of liberation) against the colonizing forces; this in a situation, the later 1960s, where it was not foolhardy, even if ultimately mistaken, to imagine "reassembling our afflicted Powers" and doing real harm to the enemy. Debord, to speak of him directly, was concerned most of all with the way the subjection of social life to the rule of appearances had led in turn to a distinct form of politics – of state formation and surveillance. His opinion on these matters fluctuated: they were the aspect of the present he most loathed, and which regularly elicited his best tirades and worst paranoia. We extract the following propositions from his pages.

First, that slowly but surely the state in the twentieth century had been dragged into full collaboration in the micromanagement of everyday life. The market's necessity became the state's obsession. (We say that this happened slowly, and in a sense against the state's better judgment,

because always there existed a tension between the modern state's constant armored other-directedness – its *raison d'être* as a war machine – and capital's insistence that the state come to its aid in the great work of internal policing and packaging. This tension has again been visible over the past four years. We believe it is one key to the obvious incoherence of the state's recent actions.) Second, this deeper and deeper involvement of the state in the day-to-day instrumentation of consumer obedience meant that increasingly it came to live or die by its investment in, and control of, the field of images – the alternative world conjured up by the new battery of "perpetual emotion machines",[8] of which TV was the dim pioneer and which now beckons the citizen every waking minute. This world of images had long been a structural necessity of a capitalism oriented toward the overproduction of commodities, and therefore the constant manufacture of desire for them; but by the late twentieth century it had given rise to a specific polity.

The modern state, we would argue, has come to need weak citizenship. It depends more and more on maintaining an impoverished and hygienized public realm, in which only the ghosts of an older, more idiosyncratic civil society live on. It has adjusted profoundly to its economic master's requirement for a thinned, unobstructed social texture, made up of loosely attached consumer subjects, each locked in its plastic work-station and nuclearized family of four. Weak citizenship, but for that very reason the object of the state's constant, anxious attention – an unstoppable barrage of idiot fashions and panics and image-motifs, all aimed at sewing the citizen back (unobtrusively, "individually") into a deadly simulacrum of community.

Very often, the first writers to confront this nightmare seemed to despair in the face of it:

8 Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London 1998, p. 89.

> There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it .... Unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion, which first lost the ability to make itself heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether .... Once one controls the mechanism which operates the only form of social verification to be fully and universally recognized, one can say what one likes .... Spectacular power can similarly deny whatever it wishes to, once, or three times over, and change the subject: knowing full well there is no danger of riposte, in its own space or any other.[9]

Too many times over the past four years these sentences, in their very anger and sorrow at the present form of politics, have echoed in our minds. But ultimately we dissent from their totalizing closure. Living after September 11, we are no longer so sure – and do not believe that spectacular power is sure – that "there is no danger of riposte, in its own space or any other". For better or worse, the precision bombings were such a riposte. And their effect on the spectacular state has been profound: the state's reply to them, we are certain, has exceeded in its crassness and futility the martyr-pilots' wildest dreams. Therefore we turn to another sentence from the same book, which (characteristically) acts as finale to the previous admissions of defeat. "To this list of the triumphs of power we should add, however, one result which has proved negative: once the running of the state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led *strategically*."[10] Issued by a devotee of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, this last verdict is crushing.

9 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie, London 1998 (first published 1988), pp. 13–19 (order of sentences altered).

10 Ibid., p. 20.

Debord had a robust and straightforward view of the necessity, for individuals and collectives, of learning from the past. (It is not the least of the ways his thinking is classical, as opposed to postmodern.) Of course he knew that the past is a "construction"; but a construction, he believed, made of obdurate and three-dimensional materials, constantly resisting any one frame, and which only the most elaborate machinery of forgetting could make fully tractable to power. His deepest fears as a revolutionary derived from the sense, which grew upon him, that this elaborate machinery might now have been built, and really be turning the world into an eternal present. That was the key to his hatred of the image-life: that what it threatened, ultimately, was the very existence of the complex, created, *two-way* temporality that for him constituted the essence of the human.

Such was the nightmare. But even Debord sometimes took (cold) comfort from the recognition that the state too lived the nightmare, and would suffer the consequences. For it too could no longer learn from the past: it had progressively dismantled the contexts in which truly strategic discussion of its aims and interests – thinking in the long term, admitting the paradoxes and uncertainties of power, recognizing, in a word, "the cunning of reason" – might still be possible.[11] The state was entrapped in its own apparatus of clichés. It had come almost to *believe* in the policy-motifs its think-tanks and disinformation consultancies churned out for it. How Debord would have reveled, over the past months, in the endless double entendres provided by the media, to the effect that Bush and Blair's rush to war in Iraq should be blamed on "faulty intelligence"!

11 We are not denying that arenas still exist, most of them deeply secret, in which certain aspects of state interest and policy are plotted over the long term. That is notably true, for obvious reasons, of the state's enabling role in economic affairs. No conspiracy theory of history is needed, now that the relevant documentation (or a small part of it) has been teased from the usual sources, to see how elaborate were the tradeoffs between capital and the state in the planning and instrumentation of the whole neo-liberal push. The problem lies not in the

II

What, then, politically and strategically, took place on September 11, 2001? And how, politically and strategically, has the US state responded to it? Of course, we realize the dangers here. Why should we follow the lead of the spectacle itself in electing this one among many atrocities – raised to the new power of ideology, inevitably, by the idiot device of digitalizing its date – as a world-historical turning point? How much of the real dynamic (and pathology) of American power is conjured away by pinning it thus to a single image-event – in much the same way that American victory in the Cold War was rendered in retrospect magical, unanalyzable, by the mantra "the Fall of the Wall"? There have been moments when we found it easy to sympathize with those of our comrades who, partly in reaction to the flood of cloying, pseudo-apocalyptic verbiage released by September 11 (which shows no sign of abating), go so far as to dismiss the bombings as so many pinpricks, *attentats*, hopeless symbolic gestures on the part of those with no real power to wound.

"Hopeless symbolic gestures". We agree quite strictly with all three words of the diagnosis. (As do the perpetrators, it seems. In them chiliasm is spliced with nihilism, to form a distinctively hyper-modern compound. When they boast in their communiqués of being "for Death" – in contradistinction, they imply, to modernity's miserable attachment to a Life not worth the name – one is never sure if one is hearing Tyndale's cry from the stake or Stavrogin's in the last pages of *The Possessed*. As so often lately, the twenty-first century seems an amalgam of the sixteenth and nineteenth.) And the question remains:

state's inability to think *capitalism* strategically – for here real ruthlessness, lucidity, and expertise are at its disposal, and able to insist on their need for policy as opposed to slogans – but on the lack of adequate contexts in which these economic imperatives can be coordinated with others, equally vital to the state's well-being: with "balance of power" geopolitics, notably, and with the changing nature and efficacy of warfare as an instrument of policy, and, above all, with the new valencies of ideological (both "cultural"and first-level "political") struggle.

What is the *effectiveness* – the specific political force – of this form of symbolic action, hopeless or not, within the symbolic economy called "spectacle"? *Spectacularly*, the American state suffered a defeat on September 11. And spectacularly, for this state, does not mean superficially or epiphenomenally. The state was wounded in September in its heart of hearts, and we see it still, almost four years later, flailing blindly in the face of an image it cannot exorcize, and trying desperately to convert the defeat back into terms it can respond to.

One last caveat. Is it necessary to state that because we refuse to extract the September bombings from the cycle of horrors over which the US has presided since 1945, and believe it necessary, if we are to understand them politically, to treat the events of September as an occurrence in a war of images, it does not follow that we fail to recognize (and wish we could find words for) the events' obscenity? We hope not. On the contrary, precisely because the attacks in September were calibrated to leave an indelible image-trail behind them, they have seared in the memory item after item of evidence of just what it is, in terms of human fear and agony, that political calculus so habitually writes off. We too are haunted by the flailing arms of the jumpers, and the scream on the soundtrack as the tower stutters into dust; just as we are haunted by the image of Hanadi Jaradat's bloody head, "her thick hair tied in a pony-tail", dumped by the clean-up squad on a table at the back of the restaurant in Haifa she had blown to pieces an hour before.[12] We wish we had words for these things. We wish we lived in a political culture where the language of revulsion had not been debauched by decade after decade of selective gravitas. (Your Chechnya for my Guatemala. Your Suharto for my Pol Pot.)

We proceed then, unwillingly, from the image on the screen. It matters profoundly, we are convinced, that the horrors of September 11 were

12 *New York Times*, October 5, 2003.

designed above all to be visible, and that this visibility marked the bombings off from most previous campaigns of air terror, especially those sponsored by states. There were no cameras at Dresden, Hamburg, and Hiroshima.[13] The horror there had to be unseen; it had to act – was meant to act – on the surrounding population in the form of uncontrollable hearsay and panic; and it was to be presented to the enemy state apparatus in the form of report, statistic, prediction, ultimata.

September's terror was different. It made no demands, it offered no explanations. It was premised on the belief (learned from the culture it wishes to annihilate) that a picture is worth a thousand words – that a picture, in the present condition of politics, is itself, if sufficiently well executed, a specific and effective piece of statecraft. Of course the martyr-pilots knew that bringing down the Twin Towers would do nothing, or next to nothing, to stop the actual circuits of capital. But circuits of capital are bound up, in the longer term, with circuits of sociability – patterns of belief and desire, levels of confidence, degrees of identification with the good life of the commodity. And these, said the terrorists, thinking strategically, are aspects of the social imaginary still (always, interminably) being put together by the perpetual emotion machines. Supposing those machines could be captured for a moment, and on them appeared the perfect image of capitalism's negation. Would that not be enough? Enough truly to destabilize the state and society, and produce a sequence of vauntings and paranoias whose long-term political consequences for the capitalist world order would, at the very least, be unpredictable?

13 It was not until a year after Hiroshima, in July 1946, that the twin signs of post-war modernity – the mushroom cloud and the two-piece bathing suit – were given form in and around the Bikini "tests". "Eighteen tons of cinematography equipment and more than half the world's supply of motion picture film were on hand to record the Able and Baker explosions" (Jack Niedenthal, *For the Good of Mankind: A History of the People of Bikini and their Islands*, Majuro, MH 2001, p. 3). Interested readers may also wish to consult Michael Light, *100 Suns*, New York 2003.

Or perhaps *entirely* predictable, from a geopolitical standpoint. "You know our demands", said the martyr-pilots (strictly to themselves). "And we know you cannot accede to them .... We know what you will do instead .... We are certain your answer will be military .... We anticipate your idiot leader blurting out the word crusade .... What you will do will vindicate our analysis point by point, humiliation by humiliation, and confirm the world of Islamism in its despairing strength .... And you will do it because there is no answer to our image-victory, yet you (because humiliation is something in which you have no schooling) have to pretend there is one."[14]

The terrorists (to put it only slightly differently) followed the logic of the spectacle to its charnel-house conclusion. If, to trot out Debord's over-famous aphorism again, "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image",[15] then what more adequate encapsulation of the process could there be but the World Trade Center (with its multiplication of the terminally gigantic by two)? And what other means of defeating it – its social instrumentality, that is, its power over the consuming imagination – than have it be literally obliterated on camera?

We are rehearsing a logic, not endorsing it. But we believe that only by recognizing what was truly "modern" in the martyr-pilots' strategy – truly the opposite of a desperate, powerless, atavistic pinprick; truly the *instigator* of the state's present agony – will the Left be able to move toward argument with the new terrorism's premises and upshots. At the level of the image (here is premise number one) the state is vulnerable; and that level is now fully part of, necessary to, the state's apparatus of

14 In an al-Qaida statement released in the wake of the Madrid bombings, the organization announced that it hoped Bush would win the November election, because he acts "with force not wisdom", and "Being targeted by an enemy is what will wake us from our slumber". Cited in M. Rodenbeck, 'Islam Confronts Its Demons', *New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2004, p. 16.

15 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York 1994 (first pub. 1967), p. 24 .

self-reproduction. Terror can take over the image-machinery for a moment – and a moment, in the timeless echo chamber of the spectacle, may now eternally be all there is – and use it to amplify, reiterate, accumulate the sheer visible happening of defeat. It is a confirmation of the terrorists' hopes that after the first days, in the US, the fall of the Towers became exactly the image that *had not to be shown*.[16] The taboo only made the afterimage more palpable and effective. Everything in the culture went on, and still goes on, in relation to that past image-event; nothing in the culture can address the event directly. The silence of so-called "popular culture" in the face of September 11 has been deafening. (It is as if the commercial music of America in the mid-twentieth century had had nothing to say about war, or race, or the Depression, or the new world of goods and appliances. It had plenty – partly because the adjective "popular" still pointed to something real about its audiences and raw materials. That was long ago, of course: the present total obedience of the culture industry to the protocols of the War on Terror – its immediate ingestion and reproduction of the state's interdicts and paranoias – is proof positive, if any were needed, of the snuffing out of the last traces of insubordination in the studios of Time Warner.)

The logic of the pilots was part fantasy, we would argue, part (proven) lucidity. We could reply to it by saying that the new terrorists succumbed to the temptation of the spectacle, rather than devising a way to outflank or contest it. They were exponents of the idea (brilliant exponents, but this only reveals the idea's fundamental heartlessness) that control over the image is now the key to social power; and that image-power, like all other forms of ownership and ascendancy under capitalism, has been subject to an ineluctable process of concentration, so that now it is manifest in certain identifiable (targetable) places,

16 A Bush campaign commercial in March 2004 broke the rule of invisibility, and was taken off the air (with grovelling apologies) in a matter of hours.

monuments, pseudo-bodies, icons, logos, manufactured non-events; signs that in their very emptiness and worthlessness (the Twin Towers as architecture were perfect examples) rule the imaginary earth; and whose concentrated, materialized nullity gives the new terror a chance – to frighten, demoralize, turn the world upside down.

Once upon a time (and still, as we write) bombers went out into the city with their sensible holdalls, or their windbreakers a little more tightly zipped than usual. Once upon a time the shrapnel sliced through livers and skulls in neighborhood restaurants, street markets, dance halls, breeding the contagion of rumor in the narrow streets, sapping the will of a class or colonial enemy, driving its cadres back into the isolation – the demoralization – of "home"; eroding, that is, the patterns of sociability (patterns of fear and enforcement, yes, but embedded in a wider and deeper universe of loyalties) that had held a regime together.

Now a new breed of bomber has understood that in the society they are attacking such networks of sociability are secondary: not absent, not irrelevant, but increasingly supplanted by a ghost sociability which does not need its citizens to leave home for its key rituals and allegiances to reproduce themselves. The terror of September 11 had a handful of targets (our tendency to make it, in memory, simply "the bombing of the Twin Towers" is not untrue to the logic of the event). The perpetrators knew full well that they lacked the means to spread out through the wider social fabric and bring day-to-day business to a halt. And they believed, rightly or wrongly, that in present circumstances they did not need to. What they did was designed to hold us indoors, to make us turn back and back to a moving image of capitalism screaming and exploding, to make us go on listening (in spite of ourselves) to the odious talking heads trying to put something, anything, in place of the desolation.

III

More than one commentator since September 11, particularly over the last two years or so, has tried to make sense of the special desperation of the state's conduct in the aftermath. David Runciman has gone so far as to argue that what is happening amounts to a genuine mutation of the international state system:

> Suddenly, the Hobbesian view that states and states alone have the power to operate under conditions of lawfulness is threatened by the knowledge that even the most powerful states are vulnerable to assault from unknown and unpredictable sources. It can now be said that in the international arena "the weakest has the strength to kill the strongest," or they would do, if only they could get their hands on the necessary equipment. This, potentially, changes everything ....
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> The common view that 11 September 2001 marked the return to a Hobbesian world is therefore entirely wrong. It marked the beginning of a post-Hobbesian age, in which a new kind of insecurity threatens the familiar structures of modern political life. In one sense, of course, this insecurity is not new, because it carries echoes of the natural uncertainties of individual human beings. But it is new for states, which were meant to be invulnerable to such paranoid anxieties. And since they are not designed to deal with this sort of threat, even the most powerful states don't know what to do about it.[17]

This strikes us as capturing something real. There are several things to be said in response.

First, Runciman's argument starts, very reasonably, from the idea that the state's new level of fearfulness is derived from the possible or actual availability of "weapons of mass destruction" to groups sheltering under

17 David Runciman, "A Bear Armed with a Gun", *London Review of Books*, April 3, 2003, p. 5.

the wing of regimes hostile to the new world order, or rich and skillful enough to bargain with such regimes for a share in their military technology. (The fact that such technology was usually, in the first place, eagerly provided by the states now quaking in their boots at the thought of its going astray – that fact ought to be entered into the reckoning, yes, if it can be done without too much repetitive "I told you so".) It is a slight embarrassment to Runciman that the attack which precipitated the change in the order of state relations used weapons that had nothing to do with the disintegrating international arms market. Nothing could be more foolish, of course, than to leap on Runciman's analysis at this point with sectarian glee, brandishing some tin-pot argument to the effect that from now on the real weapons of mass destruction are the media, that the war is a war of simulacra not bullets – that "the Fall of the Twin Towers Did Not Take Place". But we would argue that the present condition of politics does not make sense unless it is approached from a dual perspective – seen as a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded ever closer into that struggle) as a battle for the control of appearances.

We agree with Runciman (against many on the Left who would prefer al-Qaida to be a last-gasp, exotic, pathetic, pre-capitalist phenomenon) that the September bombings are a distinctively modern symptom. What they point to, far beyond the specific atrocity and its grisly religious fuel, is a new structural feature of the international state system: that *the historical monopoly of the means of destruction by the state is now at risk*. That new feature has many causes. Technological advance is one of them. The rise of a worldwide secondary market in arms – partly the result of the chaos attending the end of the Cold War, partly a natural product of the neo-liberal commodification of the globe – is another. Likewise the contracting-out of more and more military services to a shady corporate world, again something that neo-liberalism began by warmly recommending to its client nations. The permeability of borders obviously matters, and has become another major item in the new paranoia. But

that fact is linked to a deeper and more pervasive reality, which again is a product of the "globalization" these same states are committed to – and on which their bloated home economies depend. *Failed states* is the term of art for this reality – this constitutive feature of the world we live in – from which the personnel and ideology of September 11 so unmistakably arose.

"Failed states", "rogue states", "weak states", "societies left behind by modernization" – the diagnoses are legion, and the facts they point to complex. Let us simply assert here, with the problem of September specifically our object, that "failed states" seem to us a structural element of the international system – a product, a necessity, of the new universe of globalization. There is no ontological distinction between the successfully weakened and permeable states on which the world order now thrives and those whose weakness has become chronic fatigue and disintegration, and whose embrace of foreign capital has widened just enough to include independent arms dealers, warlords, and drug cartels.

There is a link here, clearly, to our previous argument about the necessity of weak citizenship to the state's internal health. *Weak citizenship*, then, at the spectacular center; and *weak states* in the "world economy" which the center works endlessly to exploit. A weak state is one whose local defenses against imperial control have (through the implanting of "bases", the rifling of natural resources, the helping hand to local elites in the event of indigenous revolt, and neo-liberal penetration by the corporations) all been satisfactorily dismantled. A failed state is one where the logic of abjection has been carried, often imperceptibly, too far – so that suddenly the "flourishing" economy shatters, the bribes no longer produce the shoddy goods, the death rates climb, the effigies of Uncle Sam are paraded through the streets, and up in the mountains or in the university dormitories young men and women cover their heads and study *The Art of War*. We could say with only the slightest edge of exaggeration that failed states are the typical – determinant – political

entities of the world left behind by the Cold War, "crash programs", and the attentions of the IMF.

The events of September, it is common knowledge, were directly the creature of this world of despair. They were trained for in Jalalabad, paid for in Riyadh. But saying so does not in the least conflict with the perspective – that of spectacle – from which this chapter began. One of the key phenomena of the "failed state" reality we have been describing is the power of al-Jazeera, and the runaway world of Islamist websites (as the US has learned, much to its chagrin.) Nothing enrages a certain young Arab intellectual so much as the sight of people his own age, surrounded by an urban fabric arrested midway on the path to postmodern squalor, clutching their cellphones and telling their video worry beads. One of the formative moments in the education of Muhammad Atta, we are told, was when he came to realize that the "conservation" of Islamic Cairo, in which he had hoped to participate as a newly trained town planner, was to obey the logic of Disney World.

Failed states are a hideous amalgam of the feudal, the Nasserite "national", *and* the spectacular – that is the point. Intellectuals brought up in such circles of hell need no lessons from postmodern theory about where power lies in the chaos around them, and what means might be available to contest it. They draw conclusions – cruel and mistaken ones, in our view, but emerging from a treadmill of pain and hopelessness we can only dimly guess at – and choose their weapons.

V

We return to the pivotal sentence from Debord. "To this list of the triumphs of power we should add one result which has proved negative: once the running of the state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led *strategically*." This can be unpacked in various ways. First, there is what we might call the

Kissinger problem – the problem of weak citizenship in relation to the actual, brutal needs of empire. (This is understandably an obsession of the old Peace-Prizeman. He for one has never recovered from the Vietnam syndrome.) A tension exists – let us put it mildly – between the dispersal and vacuity of the public sphere, which is necessary to the maintenance of "consumer society", and those stronger allegiances and identifications which the state must call on, repeatedly, if it is to maintain the dependencies that feed the consumer beast. Weak citizens grow too soon tired of wars and occupations. To this long-term dilemma is now added another. A state that lives more and more in and through a regime of the image does not know what to do when, for a moment, it dies by the same lights. It does not matter, as we have said before, that "economically" or "geopolitically" the death may be an illusion. Spectacularly it was real. And image-death – image-defeat – is not a condition this state can endure. "There now exists a threat", to quote Runciman, "which makes some states feel more vulnerable than their subjects."

We would put it differently. Of course, as materialists, *we do not believe that one can destroy the society of the spectacle by producing the spectacle of its destruction*. This is the nub of our tactical dissent from September 11, leaving aside our strategic rejection of terror as a political means (of which more later). But the present state does not share our skepticism, it seems. It feels the cold hand of the image-event at its throat. It lives and relives the moment its machines always had lying in wait for it – the violent rendezvous of speed with enormity, the non-human of technology meeting the non-human of accumulation. As if Cheops himself had looked on while the Great Pyramid was split in two by a bolt from the sun. Just in time for *Good Morning America*.

The spectacular state is obliged, we are saying, to devise an answer to the defeat of September 11. And it seems it cannot. Of course many of the things it has tried out over the past four years have ordinary military, neo-colonial, grossly economic logics underlying them. The invasion of

Iraq is the obvious case in point. We too take seriously the idea that factions within the US administration had long thought the impasse of "sanctions" intolerable, had thirsted for oil, had dreamt of a new bridgehead in an increasingly anti-American region, and so on. These arguments we shall return to. But at the very least it can be said that the manner in which these policies were acted on finally – they had been the pipe dreams of the ultra-Right in Washington for more than a decade – has been a barely credible mixture of blunder, gullibility, overreach, lip-smacking callousness (hardly bothering to disguise its lack of concern at the "stuff happening" in the streets of Kandahar or Baghdad), unfathomable ignorance and wishful thinking, and constant entrapment in the day-to-day, hour-by-hour temporality of the sound bite and the suicide bomb. And where, in the end, is the image the war machine has been looking for – the one to put paid to the September haunting? Toppling statues, Presidents in flight jackets, Saddam saying "Aah", embedded toadies stroking the barrels of guns … wake us (wake the whole world of couch potatoes) when it's over.

The Towers keep falling; and now they are joined by the imagery of Abu Ghraib. One studiously moderate historian of the age of European empire had this to say, recently, about what marked the colonized world off from the generality of empires preceding it.

> Europeans were by no means the only rulers with a superiority complex *vis-à-vis* their subjects. But they displayed this complex in an exceptionally systematic, self-conscious way, and in an unusually wide range of symbolic settings. They were ingenious in devising methods to humiliate non-Europeans, and unusually skilled at encouraging those they ruled to internalize an inferiority complex.[18]

18 David Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires 1415–1980*, New Haven and London 2000, p. 12.

"An unusually wide range of symbolic settings." Of course the setting in the photograph we use as our frontispiece is in a sense ordinary, unimaginative. The box, the hood, the wires, the electrodes – these are the banalities of evil. The US is still learning the ropes. What is extraordinary, nonetheless, is the fact of torture and dehumanization becoming an *image* in the way they did here – in the midst of a battle for "hearts and minds" – and one that instantly dismantled the rhetoric of liberation. It did so because it concentrated – crystallized – a whole previous history of horror and resistance. "Traffic was flowing freely again through the city's eastern gateway at the Square of the 1920 Revolution", reported the *New York Times* during a lull in the battle for Najaf. And added by way of explanation: "a monument to a Shi'ite uprising against British troops".[19] (It might have explained further: an uprising that took place just two years after Britain created the entity called Iraq, taking the colonizers utterly by surprise.) Thus the export of democracy continues.

V

It seems that the state does not know what to do in these circumstances. This does not mean it is on the path to real strategic failure, necessarily, or that it will prove incapable of pulling back from the imperatives of the image-war and slowly, relentlessly, accommodating itself to the needs of a new round of primitive accumulation. The hatchet men and torture brigades (professionals, not part-timers from Appalachia) are being retrained as we write. "Road maps" are to be thrown in the trash can. Failed states become weak states once more. "Democracy" proves unexportable. Iran and Syria join the comity of nations. Exit Wolfowitz and Makiya, mumbling.

19 *New York Times*, August 14, 2004.

States can behave like maddened beasts, in other words, and still get their way. They regularly do. But the present madness is singular: the dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one's satrapies in order. And never before have spectacular politics been conducted in the shadow – the "historical knowledge" – of *defeat*. It remains to be seen what new mutation of the military-industrial-entertainment complex emerges from the shambles.