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9/11 and Critical Terrorism Studies – the emotion, culture, and discourse of the 'War on Terror'

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9/11 has been something of a personal obsession. Disproportionality so. For while the events of September 11th, 2001, were truly horrifying and terrible, the death toll, economic consequence, and threat posed to the world's only superpower were all relatively modest in comparison to the day's consequence. It is this disconnect, I think, that drives the obsession – the curiosity to understand disproportionate impact. How can we make sense of a series of attacks that, whilst obviously significant and abhorrent, were read and constructed as having changed *everything*? As Bush remarked, night fell on a different world, and yet the world remained as before. What changed was America and its allies. To make sense of this disconnect, Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) has provided us with vital tools and insights, so often missing elsewhere, but which place the critical study of terrorism squarely within broader critical assessments of contemporary security politics. When I first wrote about the experience of the events of September 11th for ordinary Americans, I argued that 'the wrong (the disproving of perceived security truths) and the lack (the failure to narrate) were the twin arms of the void that held Americans in a stunned, silent embrace' (Holland 2009). This quote captures the immediate importance of culture, discourse, and emotion – elements too often missing from more mainstream studies of terrorism and foreign policy, which can help researchers to understand how political communities think, speak, and feel about 'terror'. Analysis of the role, intersection, and relationship of these vital elements in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11 is an important part of what CTS has brought to the study of terrorism; they can help us understand the disconnect between an abhorrent criminal act and, no less than, the restructuring of international security that followed. Drawing on and developing these CTS contributions, I argue that three things – emotion, culture, and discourse – synergistically moulded the events of September 11th, 2001, into '9/11' – an affective, temporal pivot and discursive signifier that enabled the War on Terror to follow.

First, emotion. Amidst the clamour of politicians and the nausea of rolling news coverage, it is easy to overlook and forget the profound sense of trauma that was felt, quite organically, by so many watching Americans (Edkins 2002). Comprehending the fall of the Twin Towers was exceptionally difficult for most. Interviews from the day and in its aftermath help to capture that sense of rupture – in time, space, and place (Holland and Jarvis 2014). This experience of trauma conditioned new understandings at a range of scales: from everyday life to superpower foreign policy. Gone were the naïve days of perceived invulnerability; the threat was now here, and America could never be the same place again. Terror was omnipresent and America had to grow up. This cultural shift was felt and lived – it was biocultural – as an affective response, conditioned by social norms, and articulated as emotion in the emergent discourse of the War on Terror (Holland and Solomon 2014). Consider, for example, the widespread fear of white powder scares after 9/11. Largely missing from collective memory and storytelling, the anthrax attacks of 2001 were experienced within an emergent episteme of terror that structured a new way of being in the world. While these were ultimately discovered to be unrelated to 9/11, they were nonetheless experienced through the discursive, cultural, and emotional reality of new, very different, and all-enveloping mode of warfare, in which 'there' and 'here' were collapsed, and the battlefield was everywhere. These were the latest manifestations of the messy imbrications of foreign, security, and domestic policy, which were extended and deepened after September 11th, 2001, such that politics and security were no longer discrete realms. The folding of the

exceptional into the everyday came with enormous affective implications, as trauma – and intense emotion – was woven into the fabric of public life.

Second, culture. The impact of 9/11 was most profound in security culture, as the attacks lowered the threshold of acceptable risk for the United States. This impact, above all others, is what changed the world, inspiring higher risk foreign policy in pursuit of lower reward security gains. Risks that would previously have been tolerated were no longer allowed to fester. And that cultural impact was felt at all levels of American society. Most obviously and catastrophically, however, it was this cultural impact that linked 9/11 to the 2003 Iraq War. Where concrete ties were fabricated through deceit, metaphor, and conflation, the cultural reassessment of America's place in the world and necessary actions to remain safe in that world are where Iraq and 9/11 connect. Materially unrelated but read, written, and experienced as part of the same global battle, shock and awe were enabled not by direct links to the criminal acts of September 11th, but a lowered cultural threshold for taking military action. This point will sound obvious to professors of political science but bears repeating for students now born after 2001, for whom talk of the '9/11 wars' can breed confusion and conflation.

Third, discourse. Innovative talk of a 'War on Terror' and 'axis of evil', married to denunciations of 'evil doers', opened up space for the rethinking of world order that put 9/11 on a par with the end of the Cold War as a temporal marker in international relations. This space was opened discursively, as elites set about articulating a new language of war on terrorism (Jackson 2005), which would slowly but predictably begin to regulate the meaning of a new era of world politics. Alongside Bush's often muddled but occasionally revolutionary prose, the speeches that remain seared into my mind are those of Tony Blair. 'The kaleidoscope has been shaken; the pieces are in flux. Let us re-order this world around us'. Powerful and consequential prose such as this was reinforced in the media, through images, in part due to 9/11's highly televisual nature (Holland 2019). This was an event – or rather, a series of events – captured on camera, to be re-printed, looped on the screen, and shared online. The event became its image as much as its shorthand marker of '9/11'. Its size and significance were amplified by the mediums through which the message spread. 9/11 gave rise to distinct genres of photographic and televisual depiction that helped to reify it; think, for example, of the staring, wordless, witnesses, shown alongside endless depictions of the events themselves. These images reinforced the language of September 11th, to produce a powerful, resonant, and affective discourse, such that the term 9/11 or a photograph of the Twin Towers came to synecdochally stand for an entire waying of thinking, feeling, and talking about those attacks and America's response to them. The enmeshing of emotion, culture, and discourse helped to form September 11th and its image as a powerful somatic marker (Tuathail 2003), capable of undergirding devastating foreign and security policy for two decades.

That remains the case as we approach twenty years of War on Terror. The significance of the date has not diminished. Endlessly reproduced and actively remembered for political gain, it is fitting that President Biden seeks to end America's longest and most unwinnable of wars in time for 11 September 2021. The date will, again, serve a symbolic purpose, bringing closure to Americans that builds on the killing of Osama bin Laden a decade previously. We are not quite at a point where, as instructed, we can 'forget 9/11' (Zehfuss 2003). But slowly, it is becoming one of many significant dates in US and world history. That, perhaps, is progress of sorts. And it is a progress towards which Critical Terrorism Studies has contributed.

There is, inevitably, important work ahead. As Biden's America and Global Britain gear up to confront a resurgent Russia and a rising China, it is, as always, the usual suspects turned to for support. Notions of the West and the community of democracies are important, but less so than the cultural heart of both: the old Anglosphere alliance, with the special relationship at its core, forged in the fires of mutual colonial histories, shaped through the development of shared values, and solidified on the battlefields of the 'War on Terror' (Holland 2020). Tomorrow's wars will look different but see a familiar line up on one side; yesterday's Coalition of the Willing remains tomorrow's 'freedom-loving peoples'. CTS must be ready to analyse and critique the emotional, cultural, and discursive bases for damaging policies pursued in the name of values we are told are antithetical to 'terror'.

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