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Statement on September 11: On cynicism, indifference, and naivete

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Statement on September 11: On cynicism, indifference, and naivete

I happened to be in the United States, teaching in the South, during the attacks of September 11. I was still here when the war against Afghanistan was cooked, decided and started. Among all the impressions I retain of the days immediately following September 11 there are two that to me complement each other as elements of that internal, private puzzle that is one's opinion, one's feeling about an event that has been regarded, interpreted and also manipulated in so many different ways.

The first of those impressions was a little talk about the attacks I had with a secretary at my university. She was, and I am sure still is, a charming, well-educated lady, wonderfully helpful. She asked me very cautiously about my opinion on the attacks, and when I said that I was, of course, I was as horrified as anyone would have to be, she seemed to be relieved that we were both on the same side, and went on:

I don't understand why this is happening to us; you can see that we are good and simple people. We love our families, we go to church, we always give money to poor countries. I just don't understand all this hatred. At this point she sighed and concluded: I think that there are a lot of envious people out there in the world.

The second impression was something that came from a man not nearly as nice as this secretary, but very clever in a cynical way, from something he said as a proud confession during a TV interview. This man was Zbigniew Brzezinski, a defense advisor during the war between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. With a glimmer of triumph in his eyes he was remembering the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. As soon as he saw the Soviet soldiers marching in, he explained, he knew that this was the opportunity, the golden chance for the United States to give to the Soviet Union its own Vietnam. He had been the mastermind behind the resistance plan that came to its conclusion ten years later, with the falling of the Berlin Wall. He explained the different ways in which the US government armed and trained the Afghan people, and how during those ten years they converted the country in a nightmare of guerrillas for the Soviet soldiers. Osama bin Laden, as I learned with surprise, was fighting there as a freshman soldier, an eccentric millionaire with a private army, a good friend of the Bush family, learning all the military skills, and yes, trained and armed by the United States. Our only mistake there, said Brzezinski, was to leave the weapons in the country after the war was over. With no economy left at all, and with a generation of young people that only knew how to kill other people, the whole country turned into a training camp for terrorist from all over the world. At this point I remembered an interesting confusion that people in my country frequently commit with respect to the monster of the novel Frankenstein--

maybe the same mishap happens here as well. They tend to give to the monster the name of the creator, thinking 'Frankenstein' is the name of the monster. And indeed, very often creator and creature can be called by the same name.

Anyway, I just wanted to point out these two poles, these two extremes, that work together so well in the American society, this gap that strikes anyone who arrives in the US and comes in contact with all the really nice people who are anywhere one goes. A cynical, deliberate, aggressive external policy is combined with the good cheer, the naivete, the indifference and sometimes even the ignorance of most of the population with regard as to what goes on out there.

But naivete is not always innocent, and cynicism not always clever.

When I left the US last year, and as retaliation for September 11, a major war, supported by ninety per cent of Americans, was being carried on-- a war that from the very beginning was condemned to fail in its stated main goal. Instead of going for the one man that they suspected, two million innocent people were pushed to the border lines in panic, two million people had to leave their houses and everything behind them to escape the bombings. All of us remember those pathetic images of planes dropping bombs and food almost at the same time. One year later Osama Bin Laden has not been caught. However, this doesn't seem that important now. I was astonished to see, when I returned this year, that the really important thing now... is to start another war!

Yes, another war is being cooked and decided, and the arguments couldn't be stranger. There is no connection whatsoever between Iraq and the attacks of September 11. It has been said that Iraq could achieve the capacity to develop nuclear weapons. There is no proof of this at all, but suppose for a moment that this is the case. So what? Is that what could make it such an obvious target? North Korea, India, Russia, many countries in the world, have nuclear weapons. There is just one nation in human history that has so far proved itself capable of dropping nuclear bombs on cities full of innocent people, without any clear remorse. That nation is not Iraq. And no-one out there in the world is considering starting a preventive war against that nation. But apart from all this outcry about nuclear weapons, has it already been forgotten that the only weapons the terrorists needed on September 11 were some plastic knives, and loose change for plane flying lessons?

It is being said that Saddam Hussein is a dictator. And so what? We all know that the United States sometimes loves dictators. For decades, after the Cuban revolution, the official foreign policy of the United States for Latin America was to place and support dictatorships in each of our countries.

There is no real threat, there are no real arguments. The hidden reasoning for this war is not totally clear, but what is clear is the hidden cynicism. It is built on the belief, that

after Serbia, after Afghanistan, the planes of the United States can go anywhere to drop bombs without any American deaths. It is built on the belief that from now on wars can all be like that, an easy business for the United States, a thing that you can repeat again and again against any country. The cynicism of power is what is fueling this new war. But cynicism is not always clever. The most perfect page, wrote Borges once, is at the same time the most fragile. The most perfect war machinery has created these new warriors with plastic knives. Maybe they cannot fight the American planes but they are going to fight back, one way or another.

A famous Machiavellian line says that war is the continuation of politics by other means. This is exactly what you feel when you hear the American politicians speaking in the media as if going to war were a natural step at some point in the discussion. Here again, cynicism proves to not always have been clever. War is not a continuation of anything, war is a gap and an abyss, war is a jump into the worst of the humans' being, war is the very end of life for thousands of people. War, as Michael Zeller said here last week, is the breakdown of all values.

And yet, as we can see, a second war in less than a year is being cooked and prepared in a country of two hundred and fifty million people without any visible resistance.

Another old statement, from the old times of rebellion, says that a revolution is possible if you can count on the fierce resolution of a few, the silent consent of many and the indifference of the rest. I guess that the same is true for the call to war. And this is when naivete is no longer innocent, and when indifference and ignorance can be deeply criminal.

Henry James has written some of his best pieces of narrative by addressing the issue of naivete and enthusiasm of the young American nation, and contrasting it with the wickedness and deceitful sophistication of the old Europe. But he says as a warning in one of his novels: naivete is like the zero in mathematics, its importance depends on the amount it goes with, and the place where you put it.

A hundred years after Henry James, the United States is no longer a young nation, and has a long history of cynical interventions. The naivete of the people is still there, but more and more it seems a convenient way of not paying attention to the dirty work that is carried on around the world to keep up the standard of living, including cheap oil, for the entire US population. If you don't know, you don't have to worry about any uncomfortable dilemmas of your conscience. If you don't know, you don't need to act, to defy, to challenge, to do all the tiring and often risky things that are involved in political opposition. Naivete and cynicism go together well.

The fierce resolution of a few, the silent consent of many, and the indifference of the rest. The war against Iraq already has the fierce resolution of the government and of the

media. The war against Iraq already has the silent consent of half of the American population. The question is open as to whether or not it will, as well, receive our indifference.