

BEING IGNORANT, LIVING IN MANHATTAN

by Toby Miller

This paper has been awkward for me to write. When I am amongst fellow-travelers from the textual analysis and ethnographic wings of cultural studies, I am frequently an economistic hardhead who wants data. And here I am among fellow political economists and I'm being impressionistic and subjective. So be it.

I

I remember September 11 1973. I was in my parents' London studio, just after returning from a couple of months in the US. I turned on the radio and learnt of the brutal *coup* that, as we came to realize, the US Government had engineered in order to remove the elected government of the Chilean people. By that stage we knew about Watergate and Vietnam. A combination of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* had revealed that. But the clear and present involvement of the US in these events seemed far-distant to many people from Chile. It took the astonishing acts of brutality undertaken, funded, and supported by Washington across Central America throughout the 1980s to convince ordinary folks in the US of something that the rest of the world had long taken as an article of faith—that the self-ascribed divine right of Yanquis is to intervene in the political economy of all Third World nations in any way that it deems fit, at any time that it wishes. Those extraordinary revelations, when added to the South-East Asian and Watergate affairs, made it clear that a country which advertised itself as the world's greatest promise of modernity had turned itself into an imperialist shop of horrors. A corporation of insensate blackguards was dedicated to turn its own national legacy, a brutal nineteenth-century regime of clearance, genocide, and enslavement, into a foreign economic policy with similar effects and, at times, methods. How astonishing that within

weeks, in this year, 2002, the US could oversee another *coup* in Latin America, with no impact whatsoever on Washington, while in the Netherlands, a Prime Minister resigned because the Dutch army had failed to protect folks in Africa seven years earlier. All the work of Watergate and the *Pentagon Papers* was gone, forgotten, part of history. It had become one more moment in the United States' convenient ongoing amnesia of its own duplicity and brutality. Why did Bush not resign after the *coup* revelations in Venezuela? Why were there no calls in the media for sanctions against his Cabinet and advisors, at the very least? Why are there no effective traditions of responsibility in the Executive Government after all that even the most supine observer has seen over the past thirty years?

II

Having worked late the night of September 10 2001, I was awoken the next morning by one of the planes right overhead. That happens sometimes. I have long expected a crash when I've heard the roar of jet engines so close—but I didn't this time. Often when that sound hits me, I get up and go for a run down by the water, just near Wall Street. Something kept me back that day. Instead, I headed for my laptop. Because I cannot rely on the local media to tell me very much about the role of the US in world affairs, I was reading the British newspaper *The Guardian* on-line when it flashed a two-line report about the planes. I looked up at the calendar above my desk to see whether it was April 1st. Truly.

Then I gave myself over to television, like so many others around the world, even though these events were happening only a mile away. I wanted to hear official word,

but there was just a huge absence—George W Bush was busy learning to read in Florida, then leading from the front in Louisiana and Nebraska. As the day wore on, I tried to call my daughter in London and my father in Canberra, but to no avail. I got through to Illinois, and asked an *ex-novia* to telephone England and Australia and report in on me. And I visited a Palestinian friend, just as she got a call through to relatives on the West Bank. Israeli tanks had commenced a bombardment there, right after the planes had struck New York—within the hour. Family members spoke to her from under the kitchen table, where they were taking refuge from the shelling of their house. Then I took to the streets. In bars and elsewhere, I met people with other stories: one guy had been in the subway on the way to work when smoke filled the car. He told me that no one could breathe properly and people were screaming. But his only thought was for his dog DeNiro back in Brooklyn. From the panic of the train, he managed to call his mom on a cell phone to ask her to feed DeNiro that night, because it looked like he wouldn't get home. A pregnant woman told me she had feared for her unborn as she fled the blasts, pushing the pram with her baby in it as she did so. Away from these heart-rending tales from strangers, there was the fear: what horrible price would the US Government extract for this, and who would be the overt and covert agents and targets of that suffering? What blood-lust would this generate? What would be the pattern of retaliation and counter-retaliation? And what would become of domestic civil rights and cultural inclusiveness?

In the first days after the aeroplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Pennsylvania earth, each certainty was as carelessly dropped as it was once carelessly assumed. The sounds of lower Manhattan that used to serve as white

noise for residents—sirens, screeches, screams—were no longer signs without a referent. Instead, they made folks stare and stop, hurry and hustle, wondering whether the noises we thought we knew so well were coefficients of a new reality. In the intervening months, the US media and war planners have supplied their own narrow frameworks, making New York’s “ground zero” into the starting point for escalating global violence. There has been no reflexivity whatsoever about the history of US aggression or militarism, its policies of attrition and destruction in the Third World and its internal plutocratic workings. How could this be?

It gets back to the closure of a door that was briefly ajar during the disgraces of Vietnam, Watergate, and Central America. For the principal US broadcast networks and cable news channels have offered essentially zero in the way of informed, multi-perspectival commentary on the events of 11 September 2001 and their backdrop. I think this is the outcome of two problems. The first is the status of intellectuals in US public life. The second is the status of commercial TV in the US. Outside the pedagogical tasks of babysitting (high school), transitioning (undergraduate college or university), re-infantilising (graduate school), and hegemonising (professional training for business, the law, and medicine), intellectuals have two roles in US public life. The first is to be technocrats, providing solutions to problems that will make money or allow governments to achieve policy targets. The second is to offer cultural critique and political intelligence to the elite, both inside and outside the state. The room for this intellection is not, however, on commercial television—the still-extant mass audience is not the target. So there have been few credible, relatively objective professional academicians explaining the history of US foreign policy, its relationship with oil

interests and despots, its complex twists and turns of supporting and undermining Islam, or its bizarre insistence on an ethical reputation even as the nation is routinely perfidious in terms of international law. Nor have we seen consistently competent contextualization of the hypocrisies and horrors of its opponents. Instead, a jingoistic and spiritual message comes through, juxtaposing freedom and decency with madness and hatred.

The second problem leading to this deracination of public commentary as the two dominant influences on current-affairs TV: financialization and emotionalization. Contemporary coverage of the market is the one intellectual component of TV—its specialized vocabulary is accepted, a community of interest and commitment to fictive capital are assumed, and the deep affiliation and regular participation of viewers in stock prices are watchwords. News stories are evaluated in terms of their monetary significance to viewers. Neoclassical economic theory is deemed palatable in a way that it is not elsewhere—other than the weather. That's the financialization side—knowing and furthering the discourse of money and its methods of representing everyday life is one substitute for politics and history. Then there is emotionalization. Valorised by some as an expansion of the public sphere to include issues hitherto excluded from view, such as sexual politics, I'd rather see this as the tendency to substitute analysis of US politics and economics with a stress on feelings—the feelings of firefighters, viewers, media mavens, Republican and Democrat politicians, and brain-dead Beltway state-of-the-nation pundits. Of course, powerful emotions were engaged, and there is value in addressing that fact and letting out the pain. But as per financialization, this exclusivity helped to shore up an illegitimate Administration and a teetering economy in the name

of raw, apolitical truth. TV news focused on the financial implications of the destruction of *las torres gemelas*, and insisted on asking everyone in sight how they *felt* about it. On that day and subsequent ones, I looked to the networks, traditional sources of current-affairs knowledge, for just that—informed, multi-perspectival journalism that would allow me to make *sense* of my feelings, and come to a just and reasoned decision about how the US should respond. I waited in vain. No such commentary came forward. Just a lot of asinine inquiries from reporters that were identical to those they pose to basketballers after a game: Question—‘How do you feel now?’ Answer—‘God was with me today.’ But learning of the military-political economy, global inequality, and ideologies and organizations that made for our grief and loss—for that, there was no expertise, no discourse, and no space. TV had forgotten how to do it. *My* principal feeling soon became one of frustration.

In the intervening months, we have seen other, more unstable ways of interpreting the signs of September 11 and its aftermath. Karl-Heinz Stockhausen’s work was banished (at least temporarily) from the canon of avant-garde electronic music when he described the attack on *las torres gemelas* as akin to a work of art. If Jacques Derrida had described it as an act of deconstruction (turning technological modernity literally in on itself), or Jean Baudrillard had announced that the event was so thick with mediation it had not truly taken place, something similar would have happened to them (and still may). This is because, as Don DeLillo so eloquently put it for readers of *Harpers Magazine*, in implicit reaction to the plaintive cry “Why do they hate us?”: “it is the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind”—whether via

military action or cultural iconography, one might add. They do not hate “us” because they “hate freedom,” as Bush II insists. “They” hate hypocritical neo-colonialism.

What GK Chesterton called the “flints and tiles” of urban existence were rent asunder on September 11 2001 like so many victims of high-altitude US bombing raids. As a First-World disaster, it became knowable as the first-ever US “ground zero” precisely through the high premium immediately set on the lives of Manhattan residents and the rarefied discussion of how to commemorate the high-altitude towers. When, a few weeks later, an American Airlines plane crashed on take-off from Queens, that borough was left open to all comers. But Manhattan was immediately locked down, flown over by “friendly” bombers. In stark contrast to the open if desperate faces on the street of 11 September, people went about their business with heads bowed even lower than is customary.

Contradictory deconstructions and valuations of Manhattan lives mean that September 11 will live in infamy and hyper-knowability. The vengeful United States government and population continue on their way. Local residents must ponder insurance claims, real-estate values, children’s terrors, and their own roles in something beyond their ken. New York has been forced beyond being the center of the financial world. It is a military target, a place that is receiving as well as dispatching the slings and arrows of global fortune.

In one sense, attrition-at-a-distance, as per Chile in 1973, has ended. In another, as we have come to see these past nine months, it is undergoing a frightening renewal. The

blasé attitude to Venezuelan democracy adopted by the US and its plutocratic media provides yet further evidence—if any were needed. Today, you are *not* all Americans, as the Israeli Government raced to say last September, because you are not as ignorant of what the United States does as those of us who live in Manhattan.