

September 11 And Its Aftermath – A Moment For Self-Critique ?

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[1] The American government reacted to the cruel attacks of September 11th in a way that causes respect and gives rise to optimism. Even if President Bush, on the first day after the attack, used a rather silly Wild West manner to call for the extradition of Usama Bin Laden ("Dead or Alive!"), tone changed. Thereon, he and his government, especially in his speech in Congress, showed an essentially different approach: Firm and without any willingness to compromises, but at the same time level-headed and differentiated he announced the war against terrorism. The wide-spread fear of a unilateral and blind retaliatory strike seems to have been premature. Instead, a long-term campaign, based on international cooperation, combining military and secret service, diplomatic and economic measures, is on its way. The American government, that seems to be the message, turns its back on isolationism, as it grew in recent years, and seeks cooperation. One might grumble about the lacking or at least minimal involvement of the UN in the reaction to the terror attacks. Global terrorist threat and an international willingness to cooperate seem to be a perfect situation to revitalize the UN mechanisms. But the right of self-defense, even if used collectively, gives a solid justification for the autonomous American way of handling the situation. No, the reaction of the American government calls for respect and support. [2] And still, something is missing in this situation, something that might sound a bit odd right now, after a just suffered terrible attack: It is self-critique and the attempt to search for reasons not only in the insane brains of criminals, but in certain structures of current world politics and the global economy. In my opinion, there is not only the question of how it was possible that these attacks took place and which security measures are necessary to prevent future attacks. It is not just a question of a military strategy to fight terror and master the crisis. At the same time we should ask, why it has happened. Why does the political and economical system, of which WTC and Pentagon are only the most visible symbols, cause such deep and merciless hatred that make people commit these horrible crimes? It makes sense, that is the idea of these lines, to try to think the other way round, to think about mistakes and reasons in our own behavior and our own system. Yet, this is not an attempt to justify the attacks. This would be absurd, indeed. But it is an attempt to better understand what is going on in those human beings who committed such crimes. [3] Pondering on the motifs for the attacks, a lot of authors refer to the Palestinian conflict and the American stance therein. The allegedly biased position of the American government, pro Israelian of course, and its deafness to the crying injustice taking place in the occupied territories, even to the state-driven (Israelian) terror against Palestinian civilians, is supposed to be the decisive sting in Arabian flesh. I doubt that. Although I don't underestimate the supposedly simple signal coming from that conflict, I think it is only one piece of the bigger jigsaw puzzle. Of course, this conflict is a major reason for anti-american resentments within the Arabic camp. Especially the desperate situation of the Palestinian people nurses solidarity among the otherwise notoriously divided Arabs. Here, they feel united in a just cause. But this still doesn't explain such a radical willingness to commit mindless crimes like the ones in New York. No, even the solution of the Palestinian conflict wouldn't erase the hatred that lead to the attacks. We have to think further. In a different perspective, though, this critique of the Western policy towards the Palestinian conflict is telling and instructive. It is instructive because it shows a more general pattern in the critique of especially the American foreign policy: It is the reproach of a unilateral and egoistic American policy. America, so it goes, follows only its national interest, regardless of the just or, at least, a balanced solution of a conflict. Wherever they intervene with military forces or others, Americans do it only in order to safe their own, strategic interest. It is not the fair solution for a region which counts, but the most profitable one from an American standpoint. The USA, thus, are perceived as a world police force, a global cop, but as a biased and unfair one. A cop that is not the protector of common interests, but the agent of its egoistic preferences. Of course, it could be replied, there is nothing wrong with this kind of American policy. Why do the United States have to bring justice to the world? What about other countries and powers (such as the EU) that could help to pacify conflicts? It seems as if America has a right to serve, and only serve, its own interests since it is the one which spends the money and risks lives of its citizens – often enough because certain parties ask for it. [4] However, the deeper problem lies behind the allegation of an unjust world cop called USA. It is not the question, whether the Americans interfere with military forces, and according to which standards they do. They do interfere anyway, everywhere, and all the time. That is the essential reproach. It is not necessarily the military (and not only the American), but the Western economical system and its idea of constant growth and expansion of capitalist economies which is perceived as a constant threat and aggressive menace to other social systems, other religious orders, other life styles. Furthermore, this western-capitalist, economic challenge is not a politically neutral one; instead it is combined with another challenging idea. It is used as carrier for a very specific political message – the idea of human rights, democracy and tolerance. But what sounds promising to our ears, reaches others as arrogant ignorance. The expansion of the economic idea, so the perception of its critics, is presented as the victory of an allegedly better society – although it often has nothing in common with the concerned region, be it the Arabic world, the African continent or Far East Asia. Often enough, not tolerance and freedom of speech but greed and egoism are recognized as virtues of capitalist societies. Not an enhanced wealth of all individuals and the region, the profit goes to American-European companies and its shareholders. Instead of helping, this system only seems to exploit. This permanent attack on other cultures, used as means for economic enrichment and exploitation, accompanied and even justified by an emphatic praise of universal

human rights and democracy, and based on military power, so my thesis, has caused deeply felt hatred. Instead of using its global economic power to organize global responsibility and to fight poverty, it is used as means for enrichment and destructive cultural ignorance. This western-capitalistic system can be perceived as mere humiliation and disdain. It might be this system which is criticized not only by a few fanatic terrorists, but by thousands and millions. The West appears not only as unjust world cop but also as rather obtrusive missionary for a foreign culture and egoistic economic exploiter. [5] There are lots of ways to criticize and to rebut this line of argument. Isn't it wrong to speak of a *Western* ideal of human rights? Aren't these values protected in every culture, just in different ways? Don't we have historic experiences which show that a capitalistic economy leads to wealth, leads to more tolerance, and finally leads to a society of freedom? However one wants to argue, one thing seems to be obvious: These horrible attacks in New York and Washington reveal a deep and finally blind anger about cultural ignorance and threat to other cultures, religions and life styles. Only where the West starts a dialogue with these angry people, it can explain (not impose) Western ideas and soften the blind hatred. In the past days there was a lot of talk about a new era, a world which is gone on September 11 and a new that has come. This seems to be a premature conclusion. International, even Islamistic terror is a major problem since years, also in the USA. One shouldn't forget that it was already for the second time within a decade that the WTC was the target of a murderous attack. A new era will only begin in these days when the reaction to the attacks is a new one – and this requires self-critique in thinking about our economical system, the distribution of wealth, and our respect and relation to other cultures.