

# Aporia, trauma, and emotions in the crisis of meaning of 9/11

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Ethnicity Studies, 2015/2. P. 57–77 © Lithuanian Social Research Centre, 2015

**ABSTRACT:** Employing concepts and theories that relate meanings, representations, memory, and trauma, I attempt to show how the 9/11 events have been able to destabilize representations and meanings, break the line of history, subvert senses, bend space-time perceptions, and shake the grids of intelligibility that had allowed Americans to make sense of reality and of themselves. Our aim is to understand how mute and hyperreal representations of the events of 2001 provoked a situation where language failed, producing aporia. Due to the difficulty of its signification, 9/11 sits at the heart of a trauma in American collective imaginaries, which may be understood as a collapse of hegemonic political discourses regarding American sense of security.

**Keywords:** United States, 9/11, memory, trauma, emotions.

*There have been no words.  
i have not written one word.  
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.  
no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna. not one word.*

First writing since  
*Suheir Hammad*

## Introduction

In a letter to a fellow countryman, English novelist Peter Carey (2001), resident of New York, describes what he experienced on September 2001: “The last week is a great blur with no divisions between night and day. Time is broken. The events of the first day bleed into the next and all the powerful emotions and disturbing sights are now so hard to put in proper sequence. [...] They now have this nightmare branded into the tissue of their cerebral cortex,” writes Carey. What was it that happened on that day that had the power to generate such a representation? What was so special or unprecedented? Besides the great loss of life and financial losses, it also triggered a widespread feeling that the world had changed. Time had been cut in two and from then on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 would mean just one thing: 9/11. The events of 9/11 effectively altered our perception of

time and space. Whether we were in São Paulo, Pretoria, Berlin, Sydney, Mumbai or Tokyo, we felt as if New York and Washington were actually invading our homes as we sat glued to our television and computer screens. Indeed, the virtual nature of the experience only added to the feeling that time was out of step, off kilter. Precisely the broken time that Carey speaks of.

Whatever the different economic, political, or military outcomes that day in September may have brought about, the most important and unwarrantedly neglected of these was the crisis of meaning it sparked. What really underpinned the national collective trauma was the breakdown in the system of intelligibility that people relied on to make sense of the world, as evidenced by how hard people found it to put into words what had happened, or indeed to articulate a coherent narrative about it.

For those able to recognize that “something new under the sun” had taken place (Talbot and Chanda, 2001) and that beneath the immediate rhetoric to carry on, to conduct “business as usual”, lay an inexorable shift in world view, it was still hard to understand what had actually happened that morning. At the heart of the difficulty in answering such a question as “What happened?” lies a far larger issue that is raised by dates like 9/11: the incapacity of people to make sense of reality at that moment, even when fully aware of the inherent rupture or crisis at play. In actuality, an event that causes so much shock, stupefaction, and consternation that it strips individuals of their capacity to articulate, process, record, or understand things is clearly one that defies comprehension. As Passavant and Dean (2002) shrewdly observe, 9/11 was an event that went beyond the order of representation and intelligibility.

This article is an attempt to show how the 9/11 events have been able to destabilize representations and meanings, break the line of History, subvert senses, bend space-time perceptions, and shake the grids of intelligibility that had allowed Americans to make sense of reality and of themselves. Rather than going into the analysis of concrete US power discourses before and after 9/11, which has successfully been done elsewhere (Croft, 2006; Krebs and Lobasz, 2007; Holland, 2009; Nabers, 2009; Solomon, 2012; Resende, 2012), I turn to the emotional experience of the trauma in order to frame it as a moment of aporia, in which language itself failed. Due to the difficulty of its signification, 9/11 sits at the heart of a trauma in American collective imaginaries, which may be understood as a collapse of hegemonic political discourses regarding America’s own sense of security.

Drawing on trauma studies, the first part of the article highlights how representations of 9/11 in the media and the artistic field took on mute and hyper-realistic qualities as a result of a failure of language. The need to communicate and to bear witness something beyond the possibilities of intelligibility, beyond verbal communication – the world of no words, no poetry, no prose – as described by Suheir Hammad, created an aporetic situation that points to an emotionally collective trauma. The second part of the article is an attempt to integrate this moment of aporia in the theoretical framework of hegemonic discourses, representation and social order following the readings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).

## The impossibility of making sense of 9/11

A statement by a CNN reporter covering the responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 at the United Airlines terminal at JFK International Airport in New York City is illustrative of the media accounts that circulated that day. “No one’s talking. They were just staring at each other with their arms dropped to their sides. A pin could drop in the United terminal. No one’s saying anything [...] There’s several hundred people standing around not knowing what to do and no one’s even speaking”. Indeed, this general inability to make sense of what was going on seemed to be the rule on 9/11, when images of dust, confusion, death, and pain were being beamed into homes around the world in real time by television, internet and satellite dish.

For Jenny Edkins, confusion, disbelief, and horror were at the center of media coverage that day. “One of the most striking images of September 11 was that of people on the sidewalks in New York, their hands clasped over their mouths, transfixed in horror as they watched the impossible turning into the real in front of their eyes. This gesture was repeated, endlessly, on our television screens, along with the repetitions of the planes slamming into the buildings, and it testified to the unspeakable.” (Edkins, 2002: 243) Images upon images seemed to want to communicate what apparently defined words and meaning. “People sat in silence, absorbed, thinking yet unable to think, overwhelmed”, she noted.

Peter Carey’s, Kitty Coburn’s and Jenny Edkins’ accounts illustrate the sheer inability to make sense of the events of 9/11. The date was marked not by the deaths or the losses, but by the fact that the events “opened us to another time – a time of conflict, transformation, and decision”, Rayner observes (2002). It became impossible to “go about one’s daily business”, he argued, for 9/11 did not merely “happened” to people; it “confronted” them. It “overcame us, incorporated us within the process of [its] unfolding, and in the process, transformed us.” The world might even carry on the same way, materially speaking, but “our existential trajectories, our patterns of becoming” were changed, he claims.

Indeed, 9/11 was experienced simultaneously on a personal, visual, digital, virtual and global level like no other. David Campbell (2001) comments on how the explosion of images only made 9/11 harder to express in words: “Real events, in real time, offered up to us through the reality of television. Which then looped the video of those extraordinary 100 minutes in which some 6,000 people were killed, and repeated it, and reused it, and recycled it endlessly, searing those images into the public mind. And yet those images stubbornly defy comprehension.” The overwhelming feeling was that those images could not be real; they could only belong in apocalyptic films produced in Hollywood.

In this sense, the picture of the moment when a man falls out of one of the towers (Image 1) expresses not just the horror of this tragic loss of life, but the power of the silence the events made us witness. It makes Susan Sontag’s (1990) observation about

the photography's capacity for representation increasingly difficult to refute<sup>1</sup>: "Each still photograph is a privileged moment turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again." Several were the moments and instants captured in images that seemed to be branded right onto the back of our eyes. As such, the unbearable silence imposed upon us by "The Falling Man" forces us to live and relive over and over again the horror of that instant until it smothers us.



**Image 1:** "The Falling Man".

Source: WordPress.com.,

<<http://911allthetruth.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/hom-bre-aire-falling-man/>>.

The picture above taken by Richard Drew conjures up the same connection between falling and trauma as already postulated by Eleanor Kaufman (1999), for whom "fall" is a word that operates as a marker of the chasm-like quality of the logic of trauma. It signifies loss of control and balance, plunging into a chasm, having nothing under one's feet. We can see no beginning or end, just the infinite fall into the chasm. In a way, the image translates the feeling of what took place on 9/11: we cannot see its beginning, its cause or its origin, nor indeed can we see how it will end. Of only one thing can we be certain: that we are *falling*. The image above defines the boundaries of what the human mind can take, subjecting us to a mimetic identification with a death that is intolerable to us.

On that and the following days, thousands of images seemed to close in around us, following us wherever we went. Hundreds of people stood by, speechless, as they witnessed not just the towers collapse, but the unthinkable taking place before their eyes as they witnessed the same speechless, petrifying horror that

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<sup>1</sup> "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow. Each still photograph is a privileged moment turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again" (Sontag, 1990: 17-18).

painter Edward Munch distilled so well on his “The Scream.” Munch’s existential angst was felt throughout the following weeks, and was aptly appropriated by Iranian artist Reza Sepahdari<sup>2</sup> in her attempt to synthesize the sense of shock felt at these events that could not be understood, processed or rationalized using traditional forms of signification. Drawing on Primo Levi (1987: 96), it was the moment when horror was “violently and *irrevocably* introduced into the world of things that exist.”

Writer Caroline Knapp (2001) tried to put her bewilderment into words: “The stories of individual tragedy were beginning, cruelly, to blur. Even language had failed us, leaving most people I know with a single empty fallback word: ‘stunned.’ I’m stunned. I don’t know what to do with myself, I’m just stunned.” The main challenge brought up by 9/11 is how to make sense of an experience that defies the boundaries of language and human intelligibility? For Campbell (2001), the search for understanding was the key to identifying the *event-ness* of 9/11: an event is not what happens *per se*, but what can be narrated. And the clear difficulty in narrating 9/11 was indicative of the extent to which collectively experienced meanings had been broken down.

Indeed, exposure to such an unforeseen, inconceivable event capable of causing such disorientation deprived individuals of any certainty they may have had about reality or themselves – and this applied not just to those people who lived in the vicinity, but to everyone who experienced the event in real time, even via the media. At the same time, an overwhelming moral obligation to bear witness, to communicate and perpetuate what had happened was felt by all. This self-engendered paradox beyond which one could not pass produced an impasse in terms of knowledge: the incapacity to process, absorb or understand what happened because meanings and representations of reality had been disrupted, and the moral obligation to speak out. This is what leads me to characterize 9/11 as a moment of aporia – a kind of “blockage” of action, a “blindspot,” as elsewhere described by Jacques Derrida (1993), who stressed its indeterminacy and undecidability.

The aporetic quality of 9/11 was exacerbated by two things that jointly made 9/11 so special: its hyper exposure and muteness. The attacks were broadcast live by an incalculable number of television companies, radio stations, 24-hour news channels, both free-to-view and subscription, amateur filmmakers, cell phones images, websites, blogs, etc. A spectacle<sup>3</sup> of images, as we can see just by looking at a small selection of the newspaper and magazine covers on the world’s newsstands the next day (Image 2). Almost dispensing of words, they resorted primarily to pictures.

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<sup>2</sup> The reproduction of this painting is featured in the introduction of this special edition.

<sup>3</sup> As Zehfuss (2003: 513) notes, if 9/11 was lodged in our memory, this was not in virtue of the dimension of the attack on a superpower in its own territory, but rather because it was a great spectacle. “It was a tragic event for those whose loved ones died. But at the same time it was a spectacle. The ‘greatest work of art ever’, as composer Karlheinz Stockhausen said controversially, but spontaneously.”



**Image 2:** A world sample of newspaper and magazine covers about 9/11.  
Source: September 11 News.com, <<http://www.september11news.com>>.

The prolonged overexposure to this avalanche of stills, multiplied by continuous-loop videos running 24/7 for weeks, months and even years, only went to reinforce the aporia, while simultaneously preventing any opportunity for distanced observation or reflection (Der Derian, 2002b). To go back to Knapp's (2001) account, there was clearly an "absence of meaning", and a difficulty in dealing with the emotions produced by the aporia: "I am not used to harboring such a wide variety of conflicting emotions at one time." Stating that her consciousness was "on overload," she goes on: "The magnitude of the physical devastation; the fear about what it may unleash; the sense of sudden vulnerability; the reach of the grief, each life lost touching an incalculable number of other lives: This is more than an ordinary brain can process."

The experience of aporia was further deepened by what James Der Derian (2002a: 181) calls a "war of networks:"

Whether terrorist, internet, or primetime, most of the networks were linked by a push/pull propagation of violence, fear, and dis/mis/information. For a prolonged moment, in the first week of confusion and chaos when there was no detached point of observation, these networks seemed almost neutrally attached, immersing viewers in a 24/7 cycle of tragic images of destruction and loss. [...] It was as if the American political culture experienced a collective Freudian trauma, which could be reenacted (endlessly on cable and the Internet) but not understood at the moment of shock.

The second element that deepened the aporia was identified by Göle (2002) in her comments on how remarkably “voiceless” the episodes were. Acknowledging that history has to be interpreted by both images and narratives, she argues that the difficulty of finding the right words to string together a narrative for it was partly due to the unexpected form the terrorist acts took. She suggests that the reason the “voicelessness” was so noticeable was due to a lack of claim of responsibility, whether to draw attention to a cause, make demands, blame leaders, or even just to boast.

Silence accompanied the catastrophe. Absence of meaningful narratives on the part of the spectators. We were reduced to being passive spectators; it was like watching a silent movie on the apocalypse. Silence accompanied the catastrophe. Absence of meaningful narratives on the part of the spectators. We were reduced to being passive spectators; it was like watching a silent movie on the apocalypse (Göle, 2002: 334).

## 9/11 as a traumatic event

The root of the difficulty individuals have making sense of reality and themselves after a rupture like 9/11 lies at a far deeper level than just having trouble comprehending acts that had previously been unthinkable and unforeseeable. The almost immediate proliferation of questions like, “What happened?”, “Why did they do this?” and, perhaps most symptomatically of all, “Why do they hate us so much?” were indicative of something more pertinent and profound about that moment: a trauma.

As such, it is important to understand the implications of the 9/11 trauma in the specific context of the notion of security, and particularly looking at discourse about national identity, sovereignty, and state power in American society in the months and years following 9/11. What can we say about the trauma? What does it represent? How does it interplay with the issue of security and specifically with the political community within the structure of the nation-state?

But before this, we need to define and characterize trauma. For Cathy Caruth (1996: 11), trauma describes “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” It is, quite simply, something that lies beyond the realms of normal experience, outside the frontiers of language or normal comprehension, on the “limit of writing,” as noted by Blanchot (1995). Trauma expresses the momentary incapacity of language to describe reality: exposure to such a disturbing and destructuring event that our system of references for reality is shaken to the core.

Jenny Edkins (2002) holds that trauma makes people feel betrayed in their expectations about the order of things: “it brings to the surface existential questions which at least in the modern world we prefer to keep submerged” (p. 245). This is why trauma always implies in recognizing realities and limits

“that most of us have not begun to face” (Edkins, 2002: 245). The human mind is incapable of processing trauma in the same way it processes any normal event. Standing “outside the ordinary experience,” trauma does not fit into the framework of normal social reality, which is why there is no language for it or any other tools which one would normally rely on to make sense of the world.

And this is where the paradox lies: trauma is felt but not understood; it is memorized and recalled, but not necessarily experienced; it defies language but insists on being communicated; it refuses to be incorporated into normality but goes on perpetuating itself in memory; it is triggered at a specific moment in time, but alters its linearity; it must be forgotten, but is always being recalled and relived. Trauma is a slayer of certainties, a shaker of truths: it irrevocably changes our spatial and temporal concept of the world and ourselves.

According to Caruth (1996: 4), it is precisely the “un-assimilation” nature of a traumatic event – its refusal to be an object of human knowledge – that lets trauma slip back and haunt the individuals that experienced it. This is why Edkins (2001) shows no surprise at the incapacity of people who have experienced traumatic events to describe what happened, only reliving it as if locked into a ceaseless flow of flashbacks. Many years back, Laplanche (1976: 406) maintained that it was “memory of the event, not the event itself, which is traumatic.” In the case of 9/11, especially because of its overexposure in the media, individuals could literally relive the memory of the trauma, unabridged and unedited, pretty much indefinitely.

Edkins criticizes the TV networks and technology for basically regurgitating the events of 2001<sup>4</sup> *ad infinitum*, etching almost indelibly and inescapably the contradictory emotions that welled up in response to 9/11 in the collective American imaginary. Indeed, this is how trauma can spread, because even people who were not there ended up experiencing it one way or another and partaking in the collective feeling. And so the very collective identity gained new meaning: “Only a true New Yorker knows what that day meant,” or “You’re only American if you lived through 9/11.” In one sense, the trauma operated like an endless wellspring for the discursive construction of the collective national identity.

For Edkins (2001), traumatic events shatter one’s expectations and preconceptions of what the world is like, for which old frameworks and languages are helpless. “Our maps of the world no longer work,” she sums up. And we keep remembering not the event itself, or its violence, but the experience of having survived it and being forced to come to terms to it. As Resende and Budryte (2013: 2) describe, “trauma is felt, but not understood; it is memorized and recalled, but not necessarily experienced; it defies language, but insists on being communicated; it refuses to be incorporated into normality, but goes on perpetuating itself in memory,” as a constant reminder of our own vulnerability and mortality, which we prefer to forget so that life may remain minimally bearable.

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<sup>4</sup> For Edkins (2001) the use of the word “event” and the expression “9/11” continues the trauma. She sees the use of expressions like “atrocities”, “attacks” and “acts of war” as symptomatic of an attempt to domesticate the trauma. Even today, coming across the term “events” only goes to prove one’s survival of the trauma.

The notion of survival is central to the correlation between trauma and security. As Gaddis (2004: 69) sees it, it was not so much to do with the collapse of the towers as the toppling of the myth of the inviolability of American soil. With the exception of Pearl Harbor, the United States of America had not been attacked on its own territory since British troops set fire to the White House in 1814. Indeed, the author goes on, few countries had been so unconcerned for so long about the vulnerability of their sovereign territory. In other words, 9/11 shattered one of the few certainties shared in the national imaginary: the inviolability of US territory, or what Woodward (1960) calls “free security.” Given the growing perception that the country’s geographical position and military power could no longer provide any guarantee of homeland security, a new perception of vulnerability emerged, which should be understood in the light of the destruction of the myth of free security.

Trauma, then, becomes part of the experience of recognizing our mortality. Life can only be bearable if we buy into a kind of unwritten compact, especially in western culture, of willfully forgetting how tenuous our condition is. Trauma gives us a sudden, painful reminder of how useless and impossible such a compact actually is. We are mortal and we are vulnerable, and the idea of total security is no more than a device used to trick ourselves into believing we can escape death, relieving ourselves of the anxiety brought on by the recognition of our mortality.

To develop this point a little further, it is interesting to observe the relationship between Americans’ direct and indirect experience of 9/11 and the sense of vulnerability, anxiety and uncertainty that has grown in US society since that day. Since 2001, experts<sup>5</sup> have tried to map out and gauge the full dimension of the trauma brought on by the incapacity of the human psyche to grasp the terrorist attacks. In particular, psychologists, therapists and health workers noted a rise in the number of cases of depression, insomnia, anxiety, hyperactivity, cardiac arrhythmia, panic syndrome, and other symptoms in the weeks and months after 9/11, which could be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress brought on by the events.

Referring to this point, Herscher and Pascual (2008: 1) comment:

The morning after the World Trade Center towers crumbled to dust, Amanda Fuqua arrived at her job 3,000 miles away in downtown San Francisco. She sat down at her desk, attempted to start working, and astonished herself by falling apart. “When people tried to talk to me, I just burst into tears,” Fuqua says. “I was sobbing. People said I should go home, and I’m glad I did. I couldn’t concentrate on anything”. Fuqua, a 22-year-old human resources consultant, didn’t lose anyone close to her in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the trade center

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<sup>5</sup> "Stanford Psychiatrist on 9/11 and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder". Stanford News. (Available at <http://mednews.stanford.edu/releases/2006/september/5q-spiegel.html>); "Large Study Of World Trade Center Responders Finds Persistent Health Problems In Many". ScienceDaily. (Available at: <http://www.sciencedaily.com /releases/2006/09/060906084107.htm>.) and Holman et al. "Terrorism, Acute Stress, and Cardiovascular Health". Archives of General Psychiatry, v. 65, n. 1, Jan., 2008. (Available at: <http://archpsyc.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/65/1/73>.)

and the Pentagon. [...] Like Fuqua, Americans close to the epicenter, as well as people thousands of miles away, will continue to feel the effects of terrorism in the days and months ahead.

Individuals were having a normal reaction to profoundly abnormal circumstances. The trauma, inflamed by endless references to the memory of the event on television, by state authorities and even in people's private lives,<sup>6</sup> seems to have overloaded the capacity of the human mind to deal with such violent, overwhelming emotions. The nation was undergoing post-traumatic stress disorder: "America seemed to have plugged into an existential crisis," the authors conclude.

Indeed, the relationship between trauma and existential angst is nothing new. Sigmund Freud devoted himself exhaustively to the topic in a bid to understand the causes and symptoms that accompanied the state of anxiety. In his theory of seduction, Freud (1963: 63) argues that "angst originally emerged as a reaction to a state of threat," and is re-experienced "whenever a similar situation occurs." This is why trauma resides in memory, the repeated recollection of the original experience, rather than in the event per se (Laplanche, 1973: 406).

This gives us a key to distinguishing between angst and fear. In Freud's view, angst is the anxiety experienced when one is anticipating something uncertain, something one is unable to define. This emotional state is awakened by the memory of a traumatic event. It is therefore somewhat ill-defined in relationship to its purpose and object: it exists as long as the memory of the trauma lasts, independent of reality. Meanwhile, fear (*Furcht*) is when an individual encounters a real object upon which he or she can project his or her angst.

Traditional studies of post-traumatic stress have identified fear as being the main reaction to the trauma (Herman, 1992). In line with the so-called "paradigm of fear," individuals with biological or psychological vulnerabilities that experience extreme situations start to organize their lives on the basis of the belief that nothing can be counted on in life except death. The fact that they have faced a situation in which their very lives were on the line makes them recognize the absurdity of an existence where everything but death is unpredictable and uncertain. The angst is caused by recognition of one's own mortality and fear of the future.

In a proposal that touches on many of the questions being framed in this research, psychoanalyst Janoff-Bulman (1992) proposes a paradigm of "world assumptions," by which trauma shakes the three fundamental assumptions people hold dear: that the world is benevolent, that the world is meaningful, and that the "other" is worthy. By shifting the focus of fear to an evaluation of reality and of others after a trauma, the author explores how cognitive schema and factors impinge on how people react after traumas. What she finds is that individuals resist any change that affects their world assumptions, which is why any sudden change would be so traumatic. Individuals are incapable of conciliating the old

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<sup>6</sup> The authors even mention a new social conversation topic: rather than, "Where were you on the day they shot Kennedy?," we now have, "Where were you on 9/11?"

and the new, which is why they react through trauma. In this context, anxiety is the outcome of people's difficulty or incapacity to accept and adapt to change.

This seems to fit perfectly with the circumstances of 9/11, which so abruptly shattered the set of assumptions prevailing in US society. Overnight, individuals realized that the world was not benevolent, nor was it meaningful, and, faced with the random loss of over six thousand lives, they may not be worthy any more, either. McFarlane and Van der Kolk (1996) note that society resents sudden change and finds it hard to take account of trauma, leading to the emergence of narratives apportioning blame that highlight the abnormality of the new reality.

The third possible reaction to trauma, which is equally applicable to 9/11, is the "paradigm of betrayal." While admitting that it could be useful for society not to recognize betrayal, Freyd (1999) suggests that victims of trauma triggered by their own provider may remain ignorant of the betrayal they have experienced, albeit unconsciously. For instance, when a child is abused by a parent, they cannot distance themselves because this would put their own survival in jeopardy. Their angst results from a sense of betrayal.

A similar rationale can be seen in Shay's (1994) study of war veterans. The military environment fosters "dependent-provider" relationships, with soldiers depending entirely on the military apparatus for their clothing, food, training, medical care, equipment, instructions, etc. When these servicemen return to civilian life, especially after being at war, they often feel betrayed by the State for not having received enough food, clothing or training or for not having been given due recognition for their efforts.<sup>7</sup>

The three paradigms set out above suggest there is a relationship between trauma, the political community and power. In the contemporary world, we assume that the State exists to instill order, stability and security: to protect the population from other traumas, as if there had actually been an original trauma (Lozzano, 2007). Yet this assumption is far from peaceful. It is enough to recall the prerogative of states to recruit citizens to go to war on their behalf, exposing them to risk. Certain policies can also threaten a population's security, such as an aggressive foreign policy. Inside its own borders, a state may use force to penalize any deviant acts, as in the use of prisons.

We should therefore recognize how closely related are trauma, the political community and the specific type of power at play: biopower. As in Foucault's concept, the power of the state in the modern world operates in such a way that distinctions are drawn that include or exclude individuals from the political process to the point of entirely disregarding the value of human life. Individuals are reduced to the masses, which are put under surveillance, controlled, disciplined, and punished. Using arbitrary norms, biopolitics encompasses life, excluding and including individuals and groups, adjusting and reining in their

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<sup>7</sup> The case of Vietnam War veterans is a fine example of this paradigm, especially for the general feeling of having been abandoned by the state after they returned from their "defeat" and were unable to adapt back to civilian life.

bodies to the processes envisaged by the state. Thus, in the name of those who should live, it is decided who should die. In the words of Foucault (2003: 255), “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, is something that will make life in general healthier.”

In this sense, Agamben (1998) shows us how biopolitics has given rise to a new category of human life: “bare life,” or the kill-able bodies of subjects that form the new political body of the West. The basis of modern democracy, he argues, has ceased to be the free man, with his prerogatives and his statutes; now, it is bare life, the *homo sacer* that may be killed but not sacrificed, life that can be left to die because it has been excluded from human jurisdiction. The trauma that is experienced could then be framed as a collective reaction to the recognition of our condition of bare life<sup>8</sup> that was forced upon us on 9/11.

## Overcoming trauma, overcoming aporia, and reconstituting social order

Traumatic events, such as wars or terrorist attacks, produce rupture and break continuity. As correctly noted by Hutchinson and Bleiker (2008: 385), dealing with the legacy of traumas and the powerful emotions they generate is a major political challenge. Once the rupture has been acknowledged, it is time to overcome the crisis, domesticate the event, give it new meaning, frame it in a coherent narrative in order to reconstitute identity and community, and reinstate social order. In this case, it became necessary to give 9/11 some sort of meaning in an ordered sequence of causes and effects so as to overcome trauma, reconcile emotions and heal the rupture in space, time and language.

The first attempts drew on former strategies of differentiation and equivalence based on familiar meanings and representations. The forms of linguistic expediency used, including metaphors, analogies, and metonyms, tended to express negation, historical references, and indistinct terrors. Expressions like “It’s like something from a film!,” “It’s like Pearl Harbor,” or “It’s the end of the world” were amongst the first attempts to make sense of the events.

Even in the first few days, it seemed clear that any narrative capable of making sense of 9/11 would have to acknowledge to a greater or lesser extent the fact that it was a historic date, a unique, unprecedented event. There immediately started to be a “before 9/11” and an “after 9/11”, just as there is a “before” and “after” the storming of the Bastille on July 14th, 1789, a “before” and “after” the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914, a “before”

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<sup>8</sup> Primo Levi (1987) shows how the Holocaust marked the frontier where man ceased to be man and started to be bare life. In his account, in the concentration camps, life was something that could be used instrumentally in medical experiences, as slave labor, or as plain fun. Punishments were totally arbitrary and unquestionable. There was no reason for anything.

and “after” the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989.<sup>9</sup> 2001 quickly joined the ranks of turning points like 1929, 1945, 1973 and 1989: September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 would henceforth be 9/11.

Challenging this narrative of exceptionality, Der Derian (2002c) points out that 9/11 quickly took on qualities of an “exceptional ahistoricity,” becoming a moment challenged by explanations within the normal course of history, especially if considered in relation to the contemporary thesis of the end of History.<sup>10</sup> He goes on to stress the historical-milestone narrative and its implications for the production of knowledge. “Before 9/11 and after 9/11: All social scientists must now survey international as well as domestic politics by this temporal rift: [...] a repeat of what was heard at academic conferences after the fall of the Berlin Wall.” (Der Derian 2002c: 177)

Indeed, the danger of immediate and simplistic characterizations, especially narratives about some exceptionality which no existing theory can take account of, translates into a warning against reading terrorism exclusively in the lights of 9/11. According to Der Derian (2002b), political discourses around the exceptional ahistoricity of 9/11 pushes us to interpret it as an exception that bans critical thought and justifies a state of permanent emergency.

Rayner (2002) recommends that first we should “inhabit the time of the event”: domesticate it so we can take responsibility for its potential outcomes. This implies putting events in their due historical context, that is, articulating a narrative that helps us understand what happened without falling into the trap of making value judgments or pointing fingers. It is a search for a narrative of neutrality capable of preventing conflict, not spreading it.

Even so, it would not be wrong to say that “a fracture occurred; a fracture which took command of the memory”, as termed by Göle (2002: 333), and that it was then imperative to construct a coherent narrative to comprehend the reasons behind the fracture. Despite its over simplicity and flaws, Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clash of civilizations successfully responded to the immediate outcry for an explanation for it named the guilty parties (Muslim extremist groups), explained their motives (anti-modernity and anti-Western civilization/culture/religion), and sketched out a course of action to prevent further attacks of a similar nature (as this was a conflict between mutually exclusive civilizations, conflict was the only answer).

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<sup>9</sup> Sturken (2002: 374) comments that when a given date is deemed exceptional, in that it is discursively constructed as dividing time into a “before” and an “after,” there is nothing exceptional in this, quite the contrary. Citing other declarations about milestones in history, he alludes to Virginia Woolf and Theodor Adorno: “Writing in 1924 about the experience of modernity, Virginia Woolf stated: “on or about December 1910, human character changed”. Many years later, Theodor Adorno wrote, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, implying that cultural production was irrevocably changed in the wake of the Holocaust.”

<sup>10</sup> Zizek (2008) alludes to the topic when he says, symbolically, that the 2001 terrorist attacks represented the end of Fukuyama’s utopia. “It was the end of that merry age [of the 1990’s expansion of liberal capitalism]. We are now back to history,” he argues.

From a linguistic perspective, Linde (1993: 114) explains that narratives bring people together. "Telling stories creates a sense of belonging to the group and solidarity between its members." In unsettling, worrying times, they operate as channels for interpreting reality and trying to marshal and domesticate any strange or unintelligible elements. In other words, they serve to reconstitute the system of meanings and representations that make sense of the world, helping individuals to overcome the aporia triggered by the crisis.

This position is shared by Ross (2002: 305), who argues that "narratives are especially relevant for groups of individuals caught in situations of high uncertainty and high stress." When individuals are disoriented, he goes on, they tend to attribute meaning to what they experience through their senses. Collective narratives that are reaffirmed by the group help give them comfort and help them deal with their anxiety. For this very reason, narratives "do not come out of the same bag": they must be anchored in experience and fears that are interpreted selectively so that they can resonate collectively. I therefore conclude that narratives, especially those that are designed to overcome moments of crisis, are rooted in the culture of that specific group.

Here, I will address culture from the perspective of semiotics, as proposed by Geertz (1973): a system of historically transmitted "webs of meanings" that can be identified from the symbols by which individuals "communicate, perpetuate, and develop knowledge and attitudes about life." The public nature of culture stressed by Geertz allows it to be understood as a system of representations that transmits the cognitive and affective beliefs shared by the members of a group about reality and themselves. The sharing of these beliefs allows them to identify themselves collectively in relation to those that do not share them. This is culture as a lens for interpreting a reality, with the simultaneous capacity to express a different "way of life" and mark out belonging. It is in this sense capable of reconstituting identity, community, and solidarity, of (re)creating a "we-feeling" (*Wir-Gefühl*).

In situations of crisis and rupture, narratives evoke the imaginary past of a group to re-signify the meanings contained in its "way of life," thereby adapting and reconstituting individuals' cognitive and affective beliefs about reality and themselves. When ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety are awakened by a crisis, narratives can often reconnect individual and collective identities, re-signifying reality and what things mean to people. There can be no doubt that a crisis is propitious for bolstering the sense of solidarity in a group, reinforcing the collective imaginary of a common origin and fate, curbing internal dissent and aligning bodies and behaviors.

The post-9/11 trauma shattered the traditional structures that made sense of reality and of individuals themselves. All of a sudden, America found itself unable to make sense of "the order of things." In particular, it lost all sense of what America itself was: What was it? What was its place in the world? Who were Americans in this scenario of crisis and trauma? It is no surprise, then, that the question that was most heard in the first moments was: Why do they hate us

so? This only goes to show that the meaning of American national identity had been cast into doubt, indicating the first cracks in the collapse of the dominant discourse regarding the very meaning of “Americanness” (Resende, 2012).

The question that now begs to be asked is: How can we seize the moment of crisis to initiate a transformation in social relations? More specifically, how can the dominant forces and discourses be reconfigured and rearticulated so as to rewrite national identity and transform social order? I now turn to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the relationship between discourse, hegemony, and social order. Drawing on post-structuralist thinking, they propose a reinterpretation of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in an attempt to incorporate the notion of language as co-constitutive of reality. Inspired by the linguist Ferdinand Saussure, they favor a relational notion of identity that is constructed discursively on the basis on difference, the negation of the “other” in favor of the self: identity as “something never positive and closed in itself, but [...] constituted as transition, relation, difference” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 95). Identity is then defined as a discursive construct on which one tries to impress a meaning that is neither inherent to it, nor inevitable, nor natural.

This concept of identity is similar to that adopted by Connolly and Campbell: identity as something that can only be established by difference, by the exclusion of one thing to permit the inclusion of another. They call this discursive practice of producing difference in identity construction as “articulation,” meaning any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105). The constant articulating of distinct elements within a specific discursive formation serves to naturalize these representations and meanings, as if the associative chain was naturally logical, necessary, true, and eternal. Articulation therefore relates to the processes of producing contingent meanings that are contextualized from reality that start to circulate in the social order until they constitute a new discursive formation.

The elements that are subject to articulations are “fragments of a lost unity,” and any attempt towards its reconstruction would have to be of “an artificial character, as opposed to the natural organic unity” of the point of initial departure (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 94). Since the original unity cannot be returned to no matter how much it may be desired, individuals try to put back and join together the fragments in such a way that they produce a representation of wholeness, unity, universality, in an effort to create a sense of wholeness, with national collectiveness presenting them as the ultimate space for doing so.

However, any reconstruction of this kind is artificial by definition, and thus never stable, fixed, or final. And as it is artificial, it will always be tainted by its opposite. Yet when its articulation is successful, it can represent wholeness – without ceasing to be particularity – and enter into a relationship of hegemony with the other elements from the system of meanings. Thus conceived, national identity, where the representation of wholeness is tainted by particularities, is always in a state of unresolved tension with the different cultural and linguistic elements it is made

from. At times of crisis, dominant discourses around an identity loses its articulation capacity, meanings become unstable, and the elements of national identity may then be reconfigured and articulated in such a way that a new discourse of national identity is built up. However, we should remember that meanings are only ever fixed partially, and they are always unstable and temporary because the articulation of discourse will always be disrupted by other competing discursive formations, in an attempt to establish a new hegemonic order.

Times of crisis – such as 9/11 – tend to reveal how shaky the social order is, toppling truths that had until then been taken as self-evident, natural and derived from common sense. With this capacity of theirs to bring down dominant discourses, crises are privileged moments for breaking down old articulations and proposing new ones, thereby transforming social relationships. They operate as “focal points,<sup>11</sup>” “critical junctures,<sup>12</sup>” or “tipping points<sup>13</sup>” for transforming the social order. As Katznelson (2003) notes, such moments alter material incentives precisely because the agents interpret the event differently. “[S]tructurally induced unsettled times can provoke possibilities for particularly consequential purposes,” he states. They are moments with no closed interpretation, he concludes, making each agent interpret them differently and determine their own course of action.

Based on the above considerations, 9/11 could be understood as a moment of crisis signaled by the collapse of the dominant discourse, which implies that it provided a window of opportunity for social change. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) see all crises, especially those with an international dimension, as having the potential to transform the established order because of the fissures they introduce to social structures. In other words, the dominant discourse is destabilized, allowing for the emergence of new discourses which struggle to remake the ruptured meanings in order to overcome the organic crisis. The new discourse brings new discursive arrangements, new identities, new social relationships, etc.

Crisis is therefore central to change in society. In reaction to or even in anticipation of a crisis that shifts meanings from their erstwhile dominant positions, new discourses emerge in an attempt to stabilize meanings and instill order. For Laclau (2005), when a discourse finally proves it is capable of establishing a dominant perception of reality for all the members of a

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<sup>11</sup> Birkland (1997: 22) defines a “focal point” as: “sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously.”

<sup>12</sup> Collier and Collier (1991) define “critical junctures” as “a period of fundamental political reorientation in which countries are set on distinct trajectories of social change with long-term implications.”

<sup>13</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 895) characterize a “threshold or tipping point” as the “moment of a norm cascade, at which a critical mass of relevant state actors adopt [a new] norm.”

communicative process, stabilizing meanings shifted at the time of crisis, the internal divisions within the social body are healed and it gains a new collective identity. Hegemony is established, reproduced and consolidated the moment our perception of social relationships and reality is altered according to the system of meanings and representations socially constructed by the dominant discourse.

It is precisely in this sense that we speak of the power of discourse to produce common sense, creating “diffuse and uncoordinated features of a generic mode of thought” describes Gramsci (1971: 33), or “categories of practical consciousness” (Hall, 1986: 30). Hegemony takes root, the discursive formation gains dominance and we experience a “moment of extreme ideological closure” (Hall, 1985: 105). The ideology that sustains the newly-dominant discourse now calls the shots when it comes to defining what can be deemed possible and intelligible in reality (Butler, 1993: 187), producing specific practices and institutions that reproduce this ideology.

## Concluding remarks

The 9/11 attacks had a huge impact on the collective American imaginaries. The swift recourse on the part of the media and official government channels to “before and after” narratives in the following days is indicative of an urge to turn the date into a historical turning point. As noted in the previous sections, a large body of literature points that 9/11 was constructed as a moment of rupture, with the date working as a watershed in political, cultural, economic, and above all, cognitive terms. In this sense, the difficulty in making sense of that day’s events, which can be seen from the collapse of the dominant system of meanings and representations that people turned to comprehend and interpret reality and themselves, is indicative of its traumatic nature.

9/11 should then be interpreted as a moment of organic crisis, when the meanings and representations that American society had until then relied on to make sense of reality and itself were shaken to the core. It was a situation of aporia, when meanings were shifted out of their privileged places and the result was a blockage: a deep need to communicate, yet language failed. Above all, the narratives, myths, symbols, and images that jointly constructed the American identity as a community “safe” and “secured” from a “threatening” outside discursively ceased to make sense. Intense emotions around the aporetic situation on that sunny September morning made it possible for “9/11” as an event to emerge as well as the “War on Terror” to exist: a hegemonic discourse articulated to eliminate aporia, reduce social anxiety, to overcome the crisis, to reconstitute identity and community, and to reinstate social order.

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# Aporija, trauma ir emocijos Rugsėjo 11-osios prasmės krizėje

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Etniškumo studijos, 2015/2. P. 57–77 © Lietuvos socialinių tyrimų centras, 2015

**SANTRAUKA:** Remiantis teorijomis ir konceptais, kurie susieja prasmes, reprezentacijas, atmintį ir traumą, straipsnyje siekiama parodyti, kaip Rugsėjo 11-osios įvykiai destabilizavo įprastus vaizdinius ir prasmes, sulaužė Istorijos tėkmę, suardė jausmus, iškreipė erdvės bei laiko suvokimą ir supurtė supratimo ašis, kurios leido amerikiečiams suvokti tikrovę ir save. Straipsnyje siekiama suprasti, kaip nebylios ir hiperrealios 2001 m. įvykių reprezentacijos sukūrė aporiją – neišsprendžiamumo persmelktą situaciją, kurioje kalba bejėgė. Dėl įprasminimo sudėtingumo Rugsėjo 11-osios įvykiai išlieka esmine traumine patirtimi amerikiečių kolektyviniuose vaizdiniuose, nes tie įvykiai gali būti suprantami kaip hegemoninio politinio diskurso apie amerikiečių saugumą žlugimas.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Jungtinės Amerikos Valstijos, Rugsėjo 11-oji, atmintis, trauma, emocijos.