Journal of American Studies of Turkey
14 (2001) : 51-60

When Disaster Strikes at Home:

September 11 and Its Aftermath in *The New Yorker*[*]

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September 11, the Media, and New York

When the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. were attacked on September 11, 2001, television covered the unfolding events live. For the first time, a momentous historical event involving the tragic deaths of thousands of people was broadcast in real time, with all the uncertainty as to what the next moment would bring. The Americans had watched the start of the Gulf War of 1991 live as well, but the coverage was monitored by the U.S. military to such an extent that the war appeared to have "no blood, no killing, no dead, no wounded" (Weimann 307). For most Americans, the Gulf War was a "remote conflict" (Weimann 313). As September 11 took place on home ground, shock waves swept through the entire nation, particularly through New York, where the attacks led to the collapse of the Twin Towers in Manhattan. Watching the tragedy on television or witnessing it with their own eyes, New Yorkers initially did not know how to respond (Spiegelman "Re: Cover. How It Came to Be"; Updike 28).

If live television inevitably exacerbated the sense of shock and helplessness many New Yorkers experienced on September 11, the press was quick to contribute to the process of recovery, attempting to place the events in a clearer perspective for New Yorkers. *The New York Times*, for example, besides reporting on the events in its September 12, 2001 issue, also argued that New Yorkers had already rallied together after the attacks (Purnick A6). Three weeks after the attacks, an article in *The New Yorker* magazine made the following comment: "We saw an enormous amount of grief, but little panic; anger, but very little hysteria." (Denby 120). These comments on the attitude of New Yorkers towards the disaster exemplify the tendency of journalism to interpret the news while reporting it. As Robert Karl Manoff explains, "No story is the inevitable product of the event it reports; no event dictates its own narrative form. News occurs at the conjunction of events and texts, and while events create the story, the story also creates the event" (228).

The New Yorker's coverage of September 11 and its aftermath provides a noteworthy example of how the press 'creates' an event, or to be more precise, how it aims to forge consensual ways of thinking and acting for a widely heterogeneous group of people faced with disaster. Although *The New Yorker* does not directly express such an aim, many of its articles after September 11 point to an unstated mission to be helpful to New Yorkers at this

critical point in the city's history. Writing in the November 12, 2001 issue, Roger Angell tells of how the magazine undertook a similar mission during the Second World War: "When this country found itself at war in December, 1941, *The New Yorker* wanted to be useful but didn't always know how" (90). Accordingly, the magazine blundered at times, as when it published a "xenophobic" cartoon showing two "swastika-robed" Japanese men (90). And yet, Angell argues, *The New Yorker* on the whole knew how to respond to war: for example, it had an "overseas edition" which "became an instant hit, because it contained so many cartoons, along with that vivid war reporting" (95). Explaining that *The New Yorker*'s circulation increased twofold during the war, Angell attributes this success to the magazine's "civilian" spirit which allowed for some respite from the war not only through cartoons, but also through "fiction and poems and spot drawings" as well as "theater reviews and the racetrack column and the books section" (95). Although he makes no direct reference to September 11, Angell suggests that *The New Yorker*, having rendered commendable journalistic services in the past with its 'civilian' spirit, has enough experience to achieve the same in the present.

The New Yorker's extensive coverage of September 11 and its aftermath explores the political, legal, military, and cultural implications of the attacks, both on the national and international fronts. This paper analyses those articles that deal particularly with New York and New Yorkers, and seeks to explain the ways in which *The New Yorker* attempts to foster a civic spirit that entails, in the words of one *New Yorker* writer, "people pulling together for the common good" (Gopnik, "Urban Renewal" 68). The paper surveys those issues of the magazine from September 24, 2001 to May 20, 2002, a period of about eight months following the attacks.

The New Yorker

A New-York based weekly magazine running since 1925, *The New Yorker* has a high profile in the American press, due to its "famous covers and cartoons" as well as its "in-depth articles" and "impressive array of authors" ("*The New Yorker*"). In May 2003, the magazine received two awards for "reporting and fiction" (Carr C6) at the National Magazine Awards, thus maintaining its clear lead over other competitors, such as the *Atlantic Monthly* (Kuczynski C6). *The New Yorker*'s status as "An American Icon" (Yagoda B6) seems to be such that even its staunchest critics need to acknowledge it. When Tina Brown (the editor from 1992 to 1998) introduced a series of controversial innovations, an article in the quarterly Dissent complained about the magazine's new and "tiresome penchant for gossip about the rich and famous," but qualified its criticism by arguing that "*The New Yorker* is still a place to turn to for both serious and quirky journalism of a sort that would not appear anywhere else" (Conant 129-130). More recently, the *Nation*, a "liberal and left-wing publication" ("*The Nation*"), has blamed *The New Yorker* for becoming the mouthpiece of the Bush administration regarding the Iraq war which started in March 2003 (Lazare). Yet again, the article makes it clear that*The New Yorker* is too influential to be lightly dismissed:

> *The New Yorker* may be just one example of a magazine that has lost its bearings, but, given its journalistic track record, its massive circulation (nearly a million) and the remarkable hold it still has on a major chunk of the reading public, it's an unusually important one (Lazare 30).

The New Yorker's coverage of September 11 and its immediate aftermath has also drawn attention from the press, which has been generally favorable. The article in the *Nation*mentioned above, for example, states that *The New Yorker*, in its early coverage of September 11, approached the policies of the Bush administration with caution (Lazare 25). The December 10, 2001 cover of *The New Yorker*, a map of New York entitled "New Yorkistan" by Maira Kalman and Rick Meyerowitz, is praised by the *New York Times* for its humor: with the "names of the city's neighborhood Afghanisticized," the cover enabled New Yorkers to see their city as "resistant as ever. Seventh Avenue is still in Schmattahadeen (the rag district), and La Guardia Airport is still Taxistan" (Boxer A13). This article demonstrates that even the *New York Times*, a newspaper of "national prestige and influence" (Baughman 131), takes notice of the coverage of *The New Yorker*.

The New Yorker and September 11

The New Yorker started its coverage of the attacks and their aftermath in the September 24, 2001 issue, which features several articles on the events of the day, including eyewitness and survivor accounts. Mostly by or about New Yorkers, these accounts show many responding in similar ways to the unfolding disaster. Disbelief at what is happening and concern for relatives and friends who may be in immediate danger emerge as the most prominent initial responses. The novelist John Updike, for example, watching the attack on the Twin Towers with his wife, felt as if "this was not quite real; it could be fixed; the technocracy the towers symbolized would find a way to put out the fire and reverse the damage" (28). *The New Yorker*artist Art Spiegelman, like Updike, was with his wife at the time: "The scale of the disaster was at first unclear—as many have since observed, it seemed 'surreal'—and we had to get over our stunned disconnect to realize that this was no movie, and that our fourteen-year-old daughter, Nadja, was in the heart of the growing pandaemonium" ("Re: Cover. How It Came to Be").

Spiegelman's momentary association of the September 11 attacks with movies points to a tendency in American public culture, evident at least since the Gulf War of 1991, to describe a real event with reference to Hollywood films. As Gabriel Weimann explains, the media coverage of the Gulf War was largely responsible for the emergence of this phenomenon. Following an earlier study by George Gerbner, Weimann states that the "Gulf War was presented in the media with a rich variety of metaphors and images. In fact, they were so appealing, so well tailored to television and film genres, that they replaced the war as war" (301). Even political authorities were drawn to movie talk in explaining their perceptions of the war. Dick Cheney, the U.S. Secretary of Defense at the time, commented later that the Gulf War "appeared to us—especially during the air campaign—as *Top Gun* and *Star Wars*" (qtd in Weimann 297).

September 11 also came to be discussed in terms of movies, much to the dismay of *The New Yorker* artists and writers. One Jack Ziegler cartoon, carrying the ironic caption "[w]ith every passing day, our grasp of the issues deepens," shows a street-scene where the passers-by make comments such as "[w]asn't there a Northern Alliance in the first 'Star Wars' movie?" (Ziegler 96). In the article "This Is Not a Movie," Anthony Lane shows the astonishing similarities between the script of Edward Zwick's 1998 film *The Siege* and the

comments of political leaders, journalists, as well as people on the street in the immediate aftermath of September 11. He argues that Americans, having never encountered such devastation on home ground before, have resorted to the language and imagery of action movies as the most readily available means to describe September 11 (79). Lane's argument suggests that Americans should develop an alternative language to describe and to come to terms with the disaster.

Several *New Yorker* writers turn to literature in their search for such a language. Alex Ross quotes Wallace Stevens, who believed that in times of catastrophic events, poets could make life bearable by engendering "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (qtd. in Ross 80). According to Ross, Stevens's words capture the tempestuous spirit of a recent performance of Brahms's *German Requiem* by the New York Philharmonic, a spirit which in its turn reflected the emotions of the New Yorkers after September 11 (80).

Similarly, in paying tribute to the rescue workers who lost their lives at the World Trade Center, David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*, refers to Walt Whitman and quotes the following lines from "Song of Myself," first published in 1855 in *Leaves of Grass*:

> I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,
>
> Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
>
> Heat and smoke I inspired, I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,
>
> I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
>
> They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth (Remnick 53).

Besides their relevance to the plight of the firefighters who joined the rescue effort on September 11, these lines also pre-scribe a very specific way of responding to the disaster through their emphasis on fellowship. The suffering of the dying fireman is alleviated by his 'comrades,' who reach him against all odds and remove him 'tenderly' from under the rubble. Moreover, his suffering is voiced by the persona who empathizes with him ('I am the mash'd fireman'). A few years after writing this poem, Whitman assumed the role of the persona of these lines in real life, when he voluntarily served in military hospitals in Washington during the Civil War: one duty he undertook for himself was to write letters to the families of the soldiers on their behalf. When he had to communicate sad news, Whitman would do his best to put "humanly devastating suffering in a redeeming context, emphasizing the transfiguring courage of the sufferer, the love and care that attended him" (Thomas 33). By quoting Whitman, David Remnick implicitly urges the New Yorkers to follow the path of the poet who "remains the singular, articulated soul of this city" (Remnick 53).

If literature has provided *The New Yorker* writers with a good means to express their thoughts about September 11, theatrical performances seem to have assumed a similar function for the public at large. Several articles in *The New Yorker* report events where the performers sang patriotic songs in a communal expression of solidarity. At a benefit organized by the Metropolitan Opera, the performers, joined by then mayor Rudolph Giuliani,

sang the “Star-Spangled Banner” (Ross 80). The City Opera followed suit, with performers singing similar songs at the start of a performance (Ross 80). Similar scenes took place in Broadway theatres where, according to the critic Nancy Franklin, “audiences and performers felt the need to make it overtly clear that they appreciated each other's presence” (118). In one show, notes Franklin, a joyful song occasioned “a moment that didn't erase the sorrow but celebrated our gift for shouldering it collectively” (118). New York's opera houses, concert halls, and theaters were not the only venues where the public sentiment found expression: a few days after September 11, Alex Ross explains, during a vigil in Union Square in the East Village, people sang songs such as “America the Beautiful” (78).

The civic solidarity of New Yorkers, then, has found a legitimate form of expression particularly on occasions and in places which allow people to come together. *The New Yorker*articles also give clues as to the nature of this solidarity, composed of several elements. First, it is characterized by emotional restraint and defiance at the face of disaster. David Remnick, while talking about Walt Whitman, defines the poet's “legacy” as “a civic and national spirit of resolve, improvisation, and kindness when panic and meanness might also have been expected” (53).

Second, several *New Yorker* writers find increasing cooperation between the races after September 11, which in their view points to the solidarity of New Yorkers. The writer Ben Younger heard a good-humored African-American security officer at Ground Zero saying “I never thought I'd be searching your car” to a white police officer (56). In his first TV show after the attacks, the talk show host Jon Stewart said that Martin Luther King’s “dream” was “realized” at Ground Zero:

> We are judging people not by the color of their skin but the content of their character… To see these firefighters, these guys from all over the country, literally with buckets rebuilding, that, that is, that’s extraordinary—and that’s why we’ve already won (Friend 30).

Third, civic solidarity manifests itself in a willingness to accommodate (especially Muslim) minorities. In his article “Cleats, Dates, and Goats,” Lee Smith tells of overhearing Muslim men jocosely talk about the differences of fasting back at home and in New York. This peaceful scene takes place in Prospect Park, where “a group of Muslim girls in dark dresses and head scarves were playing softball” (48). Judith Thurman writes of a “reception featuring art and poetry by Afghans living in New York” (42). According to *The New Yorker*, then, at a time when many Afghan cities like Herat and Kabul lie in ruins (Bellaigue; Anderson), New York becomes a safe haven for the Muslim minorities.

The New Yorker reinforces the sense of civic solidarity through one overarching symbol: that of the Twin Towers. Various articles concentrate on the structural strengths and weaknesses of the buildings, their architectural relationship to the urban setting, their symbolic meaning for New York City, and plans to memorialize the victims on the site of the Towers. Before September 11, the Twin Towers were subject to more adverse criticism than praise: although they were regarded as engineering feats, their architectural merit was frequently questioned. Paul Goldberger argues that they “were gargantuan and banal, blandness blown up to a gigantic size”; if they had a statement to make, it was one of

“power,” owing to their sheer height (“Building Plans” 76). Adam Gopnik also argues that the Towers did not have much to offer New Yorkers, other than their size: “The World Trade Center existed both as a thrilling double exclamation point at the end of the island and as a rotten place to have to go and get your card stamped, your registration renewed” (“The City and the Pillars” 38).

After their collapse, however, the meaning of the Twin Towers significantly changed. According to Goldberger, the World Trade Center has now “become a noble monument of a lost past” (“Building Plans” 78). And yet, *The New Yorker* avoids speaking of the Towers in terms of nihilistic loss. While explaining how he designed the cover of *The New Yorker*'s September 24 issue, Art Spiegelman tells that the contours of the Twin Towers drawn on a black background rendered them “ghost images that linger, insisting on their presence through the blackness” (“Re: Cover: How It Came to Be”). In the same issue, three page-size photographs of the Towers, showing them at different times of the day and of the year, accompany the following remarks of the photographer Joel Meyerowitz: “The towers were by turns hard-edged and glinting, like the Manhattan schist they stood on, or papery, or brooding and wet, smothered in tropical cloud banks carried up by the sea. And on other days they were pewter, or gilded, or incandescent” (48). For Spiegelman and Meyerowitz, the physical collapse of the Twin Towers has given them an almost spiritual aura: they now exist in the mind’s eye, all the more indestructible after their destruction.

Indeed, if it was their structure that made the Towers seem invulnerable before September 11, after their fall they have paradoxically become all the more invulnerable through the symbolism associated with them. It is now impossible to view them from a purely structural or architectural perspective, for their destiny has become inextricably intertwined with that of the victims of September 11. As Anthony Lane puts it, “thousands died together, and therefore something lived” (80). Writing about Frank de Martini, the “construction manager of the World Trade Center” who died while trying to save people, Amitav Ghosh demonstrates this point: “The Twin Towers were both a livelihood and a passion for him: he would speak of them with the absorbed fascination with which poets sometimes speak of Dante's canzones” (32). The statement of *The New Yorker* is clear: like Frank de Martini, the victims of September 11 should be remembered not in terms of a violent death, but in terms of a worthwhile life. Similarly, although they are no longer standing, the Twin Towers have acquired a symbolic ‘presence’ for New Yorkers. The destiny of the victims and that of the Towers merge.

One temporary project for memorializing the victims was inspired by this symbolism: a group of architects and artists proposed a “virtual re-creation, in projected light, of the World Trade Center Towers” (Tomkins 39). The project was brought to life on March 11, 2002, marking the sixth month of the attacks, with two shafts of light to illuminate the New York night sky for one month (Goldberger, “Lights Out” 34). As Paul Goldberger explains, however, rebuilding the site will be a long and difficult process, with relatives of the victims regarding the site as "hallowed ground" on the one hand, and interest groups already pushing to incorporate it once again into the commercial fabric of Manhattan on the other (“Requiem” 90).

The question of how to rebuild the site seems to be one major issue likely to threaten the civic solidarity which *The New Yorker* has fostered since September 11. *The New Yorker*writers generally approach such issues with detached irony. In "Get Your Gas Masks Here," Sabina Rubin Erdely explains that after the attacks, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of the customers of Aramsco, a company that sells safety equipment. She finishes her article with a dialogue between an employee and a customer: "One shopper wondered whether the Aramsco employees kept any protective gear in their own homes. 'Of course not,' Scwartz [the employee] said. 'You can't live your life worrying over that sort of thing' " (60). Nick Paumgarten writes about American Red Cross donations to those inhabitants of Manhattan who have suffered from the attacks. The wry undertone at the end of the article suggests Paumgarten's disapproval of some who have applied for the donations out of simple greed: " 'Dude,' a lawyer who lives in Tribeca said last week, 'I hope this story doesn't break before I get paid.' He had his money the next day" (58). For *The New Yorker* writers, at this critical time when the city most needs calmness and cooperation, neither panic nor opportunism will do.

Conclusion

In journalism, to quote Robert Karl Manoff once again, "while events create the story, the story also creates the event" (228). 'Creating an event' is not only a privilege but also a responsibility. *The New Yorker*'s coverage of September 11 indicates that the magazine deems itself worthy of exercising this privilege: as discussed above, Roger Angell's article, which generally praises *The New Yorker*'s coverage of the Second World War, hints at *The New Yorker*'s credentials in responding to times of crisis. As for responsibility, Angell's reference to the cartoon of the two Japanese men (which *The New Yorker* published during the Second World War) indirectly conveys *The New Yorker*'s post-September 11 attitude towards minorities. *The New Yorker* might have unwittingly stimulated feelings of hatred towards the Japanese minority by this cartoon back in the days of the Second War, Angell seems to say, but it has now learned its lesson. Indeed, *The New Yorker*'s depiction of the Muslim minorities after September 11, as discussed above, shows them to be living peacefully without any fear of reprisal in New York, even when it became clear that the attacks were perpetrated by Islamic extremists.

This image of Muslim minorities in New York is a telling example of *The New Yorker*'s attempt to forge solidarity among New Yorkers. In "Home Is Here," Mark Singer writes about the problems that the Middle Eastern minority in Dearborn, Michigan, experienced after September 11: some were concerned about "the American media's depiction of Muslims" (68), some received insulting e-mails (62-63), and one was actually fired the day after the attacks (70). His boss told the reporters that the attacks "made their religion [Islam]—you might as well write it as I say it—the scum of the earth" (70). By publishing this article about the conflicts between mainstream Americans and minorities that took place in another city, *The New Yorker*hints at the importance of civic solidarity for the city of New York.

Surveying the ways in which the American media has represented and shaped crises of national import over the past two centuries, Mike Maher and Lloyd Chiasson Jr. reach a somber conclusion: "Recent critics have shown that media portrayals consistently emphasize

people rather than issues, crisis rather than continuity, the present rather than the past or the future" (219). *The New Yorker*'s coverage of September 11, insofar as it concerns the consequences of the attacks for New York and its citizens, departs from this model by seeking reconciliation rather than conflict, solidarity rather than strife. The articles concentrate on a wide spectrum of issues essential to the civic life of a city. Finding the appropriate means to express communal grief through language and art is one; protecting the diverse social structure of a cosmopolitan city from ethnic or religious fragmentation is another. No less significant is the issue of orienting the present towards the future, one where the past will acquire an empowering presence in civic memory. Through its extensive coverage of September 11, aimed mainly at enhancing the civic solidarity of New York and its citizens, *The New Yorker* offers one significant example of how the press can respond to times of crisis.

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[*] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the May 2002 Ege University 7th Cultural Studies Symposium, "Selves at Home, Selves in Exile: Stories of Emplacement and Displacement," Izmir, Turkey.