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Sociologists Reflect on the Events of September 11
Editor's note: From various sources, we have collected sociologists' essays, speeches, lectures, and reflections on the September 11 terrorist attacks. We share several of them here for your consideration.

The Challenge of Terror: A Traveling Essay
Risk, Trust, and Technology in the Aftermath of the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

An abbreviated lecture given September 15 by Michael R. Hill, Iowa Western Community College

The fatal facts of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, are now well known to us, and they will undoubtedly form an indelible chapter in the national history of the United States....During the past few days, each of us has tried to understand this heinous event, to come to grips with it emotionally, and each of us has responded in understandably human ways: with disbelief, despair, and great sadness. Collectively, we empathize with grieving families personally unknown to us, we offer prayers for our nation's leaders, and we watch with hope and admiration as the rescue and recovery teams continue their awful work. Many among us, understandably, have also given voice to fear, helplessness, and uncertainty, on the one hand, and to outrage, anger, and vengeful resolution, on the other. Directly or indirectly, the treachery of September 11th touches all of us.

My goal tonight is to outline a few outstanding sociological aspects of this awful event. I am a sociologist, and it is as a sociologist that I talk with you this evening about the realities of terrorism, risk, trust, and human vulnerability. The realities and configurations of the world in which we live are sometimes perplexing and sometimes threatening. The events of the past week underscore the fact that the situations we face today are always changing and always challenging. My obligation as a sociologist is to focus and organize my thinking about the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, to convey to you my sociological understanding of these events, and to draw out for you — as far as I am able — some of the things that this tragedy can teach us.

First, we have all of us, together with everyone we know, responded intensely to this catastrophe. It is an event all of us know about. None of us have ignored it. We have all talked and thought about it, and we have all listened to other's ideas, feelings, and responses to it. In the midst of asking what can we do about these horrible events, it is worth noting that we have already done a remarkable thing: regardless of the specific form and content of our individual responses during the past week, we have all responded. I take this as evidence of our collective human capability to comprehend and react to tragic and threatening situations. It is true that we are sometimes uninformed and unfeeling about the widespread...
misfortunes of others at home and abroad, but our immediate and sweeping responsiveness to the extraordinary events of last Tuesday convince me that our collective potential for grasping and responding to the human consequences of mass devastation is reasonably intact. If we can respond as quickly and unanimously as we have to the massive destruction of life in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, we can, I think, also learn to respond in concert and with empathy to future acts of terrorism, wars, mass starvation, epidemics, and other large-scale human sufferings in other lands as well as our own.

Tuesday's terrorist attacks present numerous questions, and some are easier to address than others. How were the attacks possible? This is an instructive question with which to begin, sociologically speaking. The horrible human and physical tolls taken by the attacks in such a short time span were possible only in our hypermodern era, and were contingent upon the technologies for building ultra-tall skyscrapers and for constructing large passenger jets. These technologies are not responsible for the attacks, but their simultaneous invention and implementation resulted in a technologically dense situation that was—and remains—vulnerable to terrorist exploitation.

The hyper-modern world in which we live makes constantly increasing use of ever more complex technologies for transportation, manufacturing, military defense, policing, communication, entertainment, banking, agriculture, education, medical treatment, scientific investigation, and so on and on. All of these technologies are vulnerable to subversion. When two or more technologies are collectively subverted, as they were last Tuesday, the results are likely to be extraordinarily devastating. It is one thing to highjack an airplane, it is quite another to utilize that plane as a flying suicide bomb to destroy a vulnerable target.

Fortunately, in a sense, the terrorists struck targets that are more symbolic than structurally integral to the day-to-day functioning of American society as a whole. Had they instead destroyed three or four strategically located nuclear power plants, for example, or a nuclear weapons depot, the resulting Chernobyl-like catastrophe could have been decidedly more cruel and injurious to our social system. Our various technologies present us with enormous opportunities and capabilities, but, if thwarted and misused, they can also result in far greater damage and disruption than we experienced on Tuesday.

There are, however, very few people who would turn back the technological clock, assuming that such a thing were possible. Most of us would not want to return to a world without penicillin, X-rays, refrigeration, or telecommunications, for example. Every technological and scientific advance holds the promise of greater efficiency, greater productivity, greater comfort, greater knowledge, ad infinitum, but it is also the case that the more complex we make each
technology, the more vulnerable it becomes to catastrophic failure, on the one hand, and to misuse and sabotage on the other. This is a reality we cannot avoid. Improved technologies per se are by no means absolute guarantees against future terrorist attacks or criminal sabotage; ever increasing technological development is a condition of hyper-modern life, not its salvation.

The terrorists themselves apparently utilized shockingly low-tech resources to take over the planes. That is to say, they accomplished nothing more technologically sophisticated than purchasing a couple of dozen airline tickets, possibly manufacturing a few phony ID’s, and using knives to overpower the crews on each plane. The knives were apparently smuggled past the security systems that were installed to detect them. Communications between the terrorists, in the days prior to the hijackings, escaped the notice of surveillance technologies designed to identify plots of this type. The lesson here is that sophisticated technological systems can be surprisingly vulnerable to Stone Age violence. And further, we must always remember that there are those to whom every new security system is simply another challenge to be overcome...

Trust is required because the present-day world is a risky place. Every time we board an aircraft, ride in an automobile, or take a walk, we take a risk. The present-day world, like the Stone Age and the Middle Ages, is filled with risk. Our world neighbors in Ireland and Israel have long lived with the daily threat of terrorist bombings. In many countries today, the threats of starvation, war, and genocide are excruciatingly real. Life everywhere is fragile, vulnerable, and risky. Perhaps, as a society, many of us have been too sheltered from the day-to-day realities of risk and human vulnerability, and this may in part help to account for the enormity of the shock we felt collectively last Tuesday when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed before our eyes on television screens across the country. Risk is always with us, however:

- **Some risks are essentially ageless:** Will someone purposefully inflict injury on me, rob me of my wealth, or intentionally destroy my home? Will my lover betray me, will my employer cheat me? We have learned through centuries of experience that these inherently human risks cannot be avoided, and that without taking such risks ordinary life as we know it is impossible.

- **Some present-day risks are technologically based:** Will yet another multi-million dollar space shuttle launch be undermined someday by the material failure of yet another 10-cent rubber gasket? Will the brakes on my car fail as I head down a steep mountain road? If we are to live in the hyper-modern world, and enjoy the benefits of technological advances, then we must steel ourselves to the fact that these systems sometimes malfunction no matter how carefully we try to design and/or maintain such systems. And finally
• Some risks occur at the interface of human and technological systems: Will some unknown Homer Simpson fall asleep at the controls of a nuclear power plant? Will the pilot of my airliner have a heart attack or a mental breakdown and lose control? Will the driver of the semi-trailer loaded with gasoline and headed in my direction see the red stoplight signal and avoid crashing into my car? We can try to prevent such problems, that is why airline pilots are required to have periodic medical examinations, and it is why we license nuclear plant operators and legislate special rules for the drivers of trucks loaded with hazardous materials. But, we know from experience, that human factors cannot be totally controlled.

Such risks as these are part of our human condition today, we cannot avoid them. We can and do take prudent steps to reduce risks, but we can never eliminate them entirely, especially in those cases where others are intent on wrecking havoc or harm. To be human today is to continue to accept risk in all its forms and to act with maturity and humanity in the face of risk, and we appear, I think, to be well up to that challenge.

In summary, I can provide only a tentative sociological synopsis of where we are now, where we stand as a society, in light of the terrorist attacks of last Tuesday. It seems reasonable to conclude that we definitely live in a hyper-modern, technologically interdependent and complex world where people on occasion do terrible things as well as wonderful things,