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AMERICAN TERRORISM AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN 1995

A Sociologist's Commentary¹

by

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On Wednesday morning, April 19, 1995, a rented truck parked purposefully near the entrance to the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, exploded with extreme force, killing and wounding hundreds of people, including dozens of youngsters in a day care facility. The lethal explosion directly challenged the sovereignty and legitimacy of the United States government. The nation, our television sets reported, was in shock. How could such a terrible event occur in the United States? The television images, so much like frozen frames from a fantastic made-for-TV action-adventure movie, challenged our sensibilities and stung the national consciousness.

The response of the American polity was immediate and predictable, vowing that punishment for the terrorists will be, in President Clinton's words: "swift, certain, and severe." With understandable hyperbole, mass media commentators immediately called this premeditated attack on public servants and their children the most heinous, most devastating act of terrorism ever to occur within the borders of the United States of America. In Oklahoma, people grieved for the dead, tried to rescue the dying and ministered to the injured. On the Sunday following the attack, the country entered a national day of mourning. These events exemplify the multifaceted ways we have reacted to this terrifying event: shock, outrage, and prayer. I react here in yet another way, with sociological analysis.

C. Wright Mills offered us an important tool to utilize when confronting perplexing social issues, specifically: the insights outlined in his classic book, The Sociological Imagination (Oxford University Press, 1959). To exercise our sociological

¹ Presented April 24, 1995, to the students in my Monday evening course in Introductory Sociology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

imaginations to comprehend and then transcend the institutional context and complexities of the bombing in Oklahoma City, we must become historically sensitive, cross-culturally alert, and critical of the existing social order. Criticism and the cold light of social analysis are not especially comfortable in these hours of tragedy and mourning, but when are they ever welcome? If we are to grasp the moment to seek a future freed from violence and terror, we must look -- difficult as this may be for some of us -- to the troubling realities of the social situations in which we so often find ourselves.

The Oklahoma bombing, like many serious atrocities in the United States, was not committed by the "cultural other." The bombers were not Hispanic, African-American, Jewish, Native American, or Asian. They were not terrorists from Iran, Iraq, or Ireland. They were not women, nor were they indigent, mentally retarded, blind, or physically disabled. The perpetrators of this war-like crime were white, male Americans, born and bred in the United States. The bombers were not idiosyncratic loners, but members of militant hate groups. They were social participants in paramilitary associations characterized by anger, violence, and white male supremacist ideologies.

It is, over the course of time, white males who have committed the most violent attacks on abortion clinics and who have, throughout American history, committed the most heinous examples of mass murders and serial killings -- from Charles Starkweather to Jeffrey Dahmer. It is white males who orchestrated the assassinations of America's presidents, who bought their African brothers and sisters as slaves, and who nearly annihilated the native peoples of North America. It is white males, spouting the foul-mouthed rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan who lynched and terrorized -- and who continue to bully and terrorize -- African-Americans and other minority citizens of the United States.

White males do not possess a monopoly on horrific violence, but within the United States they are by far its most ruthless and frequent practitioners. The pervasiveness of this awful violence in America is crushing in its institutional scope. There is no social niche safe from unconscionable workplace and environmental crimes, political extortion, racketeering and reckless financial villainy or the bloody massacres, rapes, and wife/child abuses perpetrated by privileged, institutionally-dominant white males. We can escape neither the continuing structural reality of this villainy nor the social fact that white males -- not the multiple minorities they so often victimize -- are responsible for the most nightmarish and reprehensible examples of American violence.

We witnessed this past week an extraordinary example of human and social vulnerability in our hyper modern world. At

least one of the bombers is a munitions expert, trained by the U.S. military. This expert combined inexpensive and commonplace materials to create a weapon of mass violence. Only weeks earlier, terrorist chemists in Japan combined similarly inexpensive ingredients to unleash a deadly nerve gas in a Japanese subway station. The crucial point of which we must be cognizant from this day forward is that lethal weapons of mass destruction can be manufactured with minimal expertise and little expense.

Sociologically, the sad, violent attack in Oklahoma is more a symbol of modern life than it is an aberration. American culture seethes with potential for violent explosion in unanticipated and novel directions. Critically, the events unfolding in Oklahoma and elsewhere, including scares and threats in federal buildings in nearby Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, reveal the ever present contests among white males for power, struggles sometimes framed as legitimate and sometimes not. As citizens, we must be alert to this potential for violence and conflict between organized groups of white men as they jockey for power and position amongst themselves. Violence and the drive for power are deeply rooted in American culture, history, and national ideology -- we are of a society born of violent revolution, divided by bloody civil war, and ravaged by ruthless westward physical expansion and global economic exploitation.

A critical sociological imagination positions us to construct a future that differs from past patterns. Institutionally, we must seek and build social structures that help us reinvent our society on a different model, a model of community, cooperation, and mutual respect rather than conflict, savagery and brutal domination. This is an ongoing task in which everyone is called to participate, regardless of our social roles or stations in life. We need never leave a world to others unmarked by our joint efforts to transform the social institutions that presently generate so much violence and conflict. For white males especially -- and I speak as a white male -- this means, foremost, coming to understand that we are not the center of the universe for any natural or divine reason, but only because we continue to dominate -- at all costs and without remorse -- the lucrative and powerfully coercive structures that comprise the institutional web of American society. If we have learned anything from the critical, reflexive sociologies of C. Wright Mills and other thinkers, it is that we can transcend our past institutional patterns, but that to do so requires commitment, sacrifice, and humility.