Battle of September 11

John Carroll

WHILE WE ALL know the events of September 11, and their aftermath, there is fear throughout the West that we have been pitched into a big new story about which, so far, we understand very little. Neither the main thread nor the deeper meanings are clear. The half-century Golden Age that ran from 1950 until the beginning of the second millennium may be over. It is even possible that the end of the era of American global pre-eminence has been triggered, and with it the supremacy of the West.

These events invite a moral reading. Western civilisation has as one of its own twin pillars the injunction carved over the portal to Apollo’s oracle in ancient Delphi: ‘Nothing too much!’ Yet the modern West has engineered a consumer society that is founded on excess. Is it not significant, then, that the Muslim religious fanatic who masterminded September 11 did not select Christian or Jewish targets — say the Vatican or an American synagogue — but symbols of a materialist ‘power élite’? In fact, they were targets straight out of a radical Marxist handbook.

There had been high art portents. The most brilliant caricature in recent years of the absurdity of life in the modern metropolis was the US film Fight Club (1999). The central character, Jack, suffers from chronic insomnia, permanently dazed by tiredness — ‘nothing is real, only a copy of a copy of a copy’. His job takes him to horror accidents, to calculate statistics for a car manufacturer to determine whether defective models should be recalled. His one pride and joy is his apartment, and its fashion furniture, bought from the IKEA catalogue. His spotlessly clean refrigerator contains condiment jars but no food. His one relaxation is pretending that he belongs to a therapy group for men with testicular cancer.

As with most essay assortments, the quality is uneven, and, in this case, the title misleads: only a third of the book is devoted to Leftist reactions to September 11.

The editors, Imre Salusinszky and Gregory Melleuish, made a mistake in choosing a political orientation for their collection. Neither the Left nor the Right are coherent entities any more. In relation to the grave issues of the time, it is a distraction and wasted effort to conjure up an ideological enemy and imagine that, by humiliating it, progress has been made. September 11 is so difficult and engaging a topic that dwelling on the foolishness of some Left opinion seems trifling.

Also this book’s premise, that there was significant Left bias in the Australian ‘quality’ media after September 11, is in my view false. On the basis of my own regular reading of The Age and, to a lesser degree, The Australian, and attention to ABC radio and television, I was impressed by the quality and balance of the local coverage. In particular, The Age provided an invaluable service in republishing a wide range of international opinion, especially that sourced from The New York Times, almost all of which was unequivocal about the need in the West ruthlessly to counter Islamist terrorism. The extent of Left bias in the media is a subject that has been of concern to me over the years, especially when it was at its most virulent, during Malcolm Fraser’s prime ministership. I wrote on the subject at that time. Today, it is the feebleness and irrelevancy of Left opinion, rather than its influence, that is a cause for cultural disquiet. The forlornness of the Federal ALP is just one effect.

A number of contributors to Blaming Ourselves make an obvious distinction between what Keith Windshuttle calls the ‘liberal left’ and the ‘radical left’. The former threw away their ideological spectacles and considered the crisis on its merits. Foremost in that camp was Christopher Hitchens, who termed bin Laden ‘fascism with an Islamic face’ and derided anyone who doubted that America needed to respond forcefully as living in cloud-cuckoo-land.

The basic line of the radical Left was, as always in this era, anti-American, arguing that the USA deserved what it got, that it had brought terrorism on itself. Susan Sontag was an early protagonist. A characteristic John Pilger diatribe targeted America as the ‘greatest source of terrorism on earth’. Milder forms of the radical left line were expressed in this country by Margo Kingston, Phillip Adams, Bob Ellis and, at greatest length and with some semblance of a case, Guy Rundle — in an Arena editorial. Mind you, Blaming...
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_Ourselves_ exhibits its own bias in highlighting a couple of Phillip Adams’s sentences from _The Australian_ while failing to acknowledge that it was on Adams’s ABC Radio National programme, _Late Night Live_, that the most effective critic of the Left position, Christopher Hitchens, was given a long and fair hearing.

Of the book’s less narrowly political essays, the most edifying contributions come from Michael Warby and Greg Melleuish. The former considers the divide in the West between a sceptical Enlightenment tradition — its hallmark, Anglo-Saxon liberalism — and a radical Enlightenment emerging from the French Revolution. Melleuish extends this by considering the disastrous attempts in the West to imagine that redemption might be found through politics, leaving a twentieth century littered with the hellish results of moves to enter the promised land through radical politics.

Peter Coleman reconsiders Georges Sorel, the dilettante of therapeutic violence, as relevant to September 11, but fails to make concrete the intellectual ties. Andrew Norton reflects on the place of Muslims in a multicultural Australia. Simon Caterson writes a nice fantasy piece on James Bond chasing bin Laden. He might have gone further by weaving in the _Dr No_ figure and his evil organisation as in many ways the best imaginative anticipation of al-Qaeda.

In short, this is a useful collection. While it does not offer any great revelations, if it serves as some stimulus to thinking about September 11, it will have justified its existence.