Letter from New York

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THE NEW YORK CITY Opera could not have known when they programmed a revival of John Philip Souza’s The Glass Blower just how appropriate it would be post-September 11. The opera, a pastiche of Gilbert and Sullivan, George Bernard Shaw and Franz Lehár, was first produced in 1913 but harked back to the war with Spain in 1898, which gave the USA its empire in the Caribbean and Pacific. Among other joys, it contains an Act One finale reminiscent of the ‘Ascot Gavotte’ from My Fair Lady, a scene in a factory that invokes the language of Major Barbara, a newsreel of the storming of San Juan Hill by Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, and an orgy of American patriotism, summed up in the phrase ‘Remember the Maine’ (the US ship whose sinking in Havana harbour triggered off the war).

At the end of Act Two, set in a glass factory, the union is about to call a strike when war with Spain is announced: ‘There is only one Union now,’ proclaims the hero. ‘And that is the US of A.’ An eagle, bearing the stars and stripes in its beak descends, and the workers rush to enlist to fight in Cuba. It is hard to imagine a better analogy for the period from which the USA is gradually emerging, as the triumph of the Taliban’s defeat gives way to increasing doubts about the country’s ability to control the latest fighting in the Middle East.

‘Post 9/11’ has become the alibi for everything: the subways run less efficiently, people are friendlier; crime has declined. New Yorkers still talk of where they were when it happened, and there is ongoing controversy over the plans and costs of rebuilding ‘Ground Zero’. Airport security is noticeably tighter, and photo identification is demanded almost everywhere, though, as it is hardly ever recorded, it is hard to see why showing a driver’s licence to a bored guard is regarded as increasing anyone’s security. A man, collecting for the homeless, hectors passers-by to contribute ‘for your country’. The box-office success of Spiderman is explained by the need for Americans to see the good guys win.

The biggest domestic scandal right now is the apparently ceaseless revelations of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. Every second story tries to find parallels to the shock of September 11. The biggest foreign story, Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory, is defended by the Republican Right, increasingly Israel’s strongest supporters, as another blow in the war against terrorism. Meanwhile, the standard scripts of domestic American politics continue, with the two parties scrambling for advantage in the November mid-term elections, when control of both Houses of Congress could potentially shift.

Did September 11 reinforce the centrality of New York in the global imaginary, or did it, rather, mark the symbolic end of New York as the centre of the world? In a perverse way, it seems to have done both: the assault on the World Trade Towers was clearly an assault on the symbols of global capital, but it also showed that even hegemonic powers are vulnerable. Americans speak of their loss of innocence, echoing the rhetoric of previous shocks — the Cuban missile crisis, the war in Vietnam — but the world they inhabit is rather different from that of the Cold War. It is unlikely that any country has ever enjoyed such unrivalled economic and military power while remaining so untouched by the world they dominate.

The paradox is that the country most responsible for promoting globalisation is at the same time the country least touched by the flow of ideas that globalisation represents. Leave the large cities of the two coasts and one is immediately aware of the electorate that chose George W. Bush as President. (Gore’s support was largely urban and non-white.) I spent a weekend in Houston, Texas, whose urban area has as many people as Sydney, and which is a major medical, cultural and financial centre. Houston has ambitions as an international city, including plans to bid for the 2012 Olympics, and its population reflects this: Vietnamese, Thai and Korean enclaves exist within the much larger mix of Hispanic, white and African-American. Yet, despite Spanish-language soap operas on television, and a medical centre prestigious enough to attract large numbers of rich overseas patients, the city’s mainstream media remains extraordinarily parochial, with more space devoted to religious than foreign news in the weekend paper.

Two facts worth remembering: fewer than two per cent of films viewed in the USA come from outside the country, and only thirteen per cent of Americans possess a passport. The self-sufficiency of mainstream American culture is overwhelming, and protects it from a sense of what the world is really like, conjuring up an imagined vision of threatening and foreign cultures that requires constant vigilance. In this sense, the events of September 11 reinforced what is already an American propensity to fear the outside world, even while it remains possible the most polyglot nation on earth. Thus any transaction involving the outside world is enormously cumbersome. Even to cash a cheque drawn on an American bank outside the US
New York is difficult; the country that extols the borderless economy cannot expedite simple financial transactions at home. ‘You can’t expect activists to worry about the rest of the world,’ one of them told me. ‘It’s hard enough to get people to focus on Washington.’

In the New York view of politics, only two figures count: the Mayor and the President. (To my surprise, Senator Clinton was practically invisible through April, though her husband continues to barnstorm the city, raising money for causes from voter registration to the building of his Presidential library.) US city governments have roles more like those of our states, and, as New York City’s population exceeds that of New South Wales by several million, Mayor Bloomberg has genuine power.

In many ways, New York remains a nineteenth-century city, with infrastructure, bridges, subway lines, sewers, elevators dating back more than a hundred years. Unlike most of the major cities of Europe, which had to be rebuilt after World War II, or the cities of East Asia, which boomed in the past thirty years, New York is still defined by structures and monuments that are now old, constantly in need of repair and cleaning.

The destruction of the World Trade Towers has left the skyline dominated by the buildings of black-and-white films: the Empire State, the Chrysler, the Woolworths Building, the fairy-like strands of the various bridges spanning the East River. The most beautiful parts of New York City are like old photographs from the pinnacle of the industrial age, with looming warehouses framed by steel and glass, as in the regenerating area of Brooklyn that sits, literally, under the spans of the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, or the old meat markets of West Manhattan, once home to famous sex clubs and now gradually being transformed into a simulacrum of Paris with twee, ersatz French bistros. No part of Manhattan is immune from restoration or rising real estate prices: New York, too, has ambitions for the 2012 Olympics, and is planning an extension of its subway lines to the far west of Manhattan, beyond the dilapidated area once known as Hell’s Kitchen.

While New Yorkers believe they live on the cutting edge, they are in fact caught in a remarkably old-fashioned city, with few buildings or spaces equivalent to the Sydney Opera House or Melbourne’s Federation Square. In this sense, it is rather like Paris, but without the charm and style the French bring to preserving their past: rather, it resembles a huge diorama in a museum that has gone uncleaned for too long. Even its most modern airport, JFK, remains essentially as it was in the 1960s. Current building is largely confined to new apartment blocks and the remaking of old stores on Fifth Avenue into extensions of sporting and entertainment franchises. The rebuilding of ‘Ground Zero’, and plans to erect a campus of the City University on Governor’s Island (near the Statue of Liberty), offer the opportunity for a new vision of city development, but the decline of the public sector makes this unlikely to occur. New York currently faces a huge budget deficit, and Mayor Bloomberg is reluctant to increase taxes to meet it. The result is likely to be a decline in a whole range of city services, in turn promoting the trend for New York to divide more and more along class lines.

New York is a city living off the capital of its past. This becomes evident on Broadway where most of the big shows are revivals or musicals based on films (e.g. The Producers, Thoroughly Modern Millie and The Graduate). Of course, new celebrities and styles are constantly minted, but they seem strangely lifeless, unable to move the culture in genuinely new ways or to find new answers to the problems of contemporary urban society. While I was there, I watched, again, the film of West Side Story. That a forty-year-old musical speaks more directly to the life of New York today than any contemporary show says a great deal about the malaise of contemporary culture.

Like any large city, New York is constantly remaking itself, but the élan of the past seems to have gone. Warehouses and factories become loft apartments, once dangerous areas become new middle-class zones, but affluence breeds a certain sameness. This is symbolised in the extraordinary proliferation of Starbucks outlets from six in Manhattan in 1994 to 124 today. The sense of cutting-edge urban life, which one finds in a city like Hong Kong or São Paulo, is less in evidence here.

Many years ago, when I lived in New York, I struggled to resolve my desire to go back to Australia with the sense of wanting to be here, in what New Yorkers constantly assert is ‘the centre of the world’. New York is a city obsessed with itself, much as so many New Yorkers, with their constant therapy and self-improvement, are solipsistic even by the standards of the USA. (A New Yorker will judge other cities by their failure to live up to New York. ‘But where’s the Broadway?’ a New York friend of mine once demanded when I was showing him round San Francisco.) The self-preoccupation that allows two New Yorkers to discuss their haemorrhoids at full volume in a crowded subway car is the same preoccupation that allows New York intellectuals to dismiss everything east of the Hudson as without interest.

Ironically, the very practices of globalisation, of media and culture as much as of trade and finance, have made the idea of a ‘centre’ increasingly problematic. It is less and less the case that the rest of us have to accept their evaluation of themselves as the centre of the universe, or to accept that ‘if you can make it here you can make it anywhere’.