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## Placebo for pain

September 11 was all about a medieval penchant for present pain as a cure for future pain, or 'pain as cure', justified in their own ways both by those who were affected and by those responsible for the terror. But pain can never be a cure for pain, says TABISH KHAIR.



**Pain is never a cure for pain. There is only one human response to it: alleviate it.**

SUFFERING, death and terror. What do these words evoke? There can be only one obvious answer to this prescriptive question on the "occasion" of the "first anniversary" of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. And yet there is at least one other answer: the Plague. Let us, then, observe the "anniversary" of that sad day in September 2001, but let us observe it under the sign of the plague.

For there is much that it shared (and shares) with the plague.

In folk consciousness in most countries — and not least in Europe and European-settler countries like the United States — the word "plague" remains associated with suffering and death and terror. With growing awareness of the causes and better medical treatment, plagues no longer sweep across countries as they used to in the medieval period. And yet, plagues are not irrelevant to our times.

A plague is a "disease or other condition causing high mortality or morbidity and often accompanied by social dislocation". But the plague is also spread by "social dislocation". So much so that outbreaks of the plague often led to segregation of the poor and the stranger, especially in communities that felt themselves exempt from this "scourge of God".

For that is what the plague was seen as in medieval times: the scourge of god, divine manifestation and divine chastisement. And connected to it was the independent implication of suffering as atonement, of pain as redemption. As many folk traditions still have it: pain cures pain.

What, the reader might still be wondering, does all this have to do with September 11?



Much, I would answer. Suffering, death and terror, obviously. But also "the scourge of god" and "social dislocation" and segregation and prejudice against strangers. And, above all, pain — the myth of pain as a cure.

One can never really write about suffering; and death, by definition, takes us into the realm of wordlessness. That is why death is simpler than suffering. One can count and record the thousands of needless deaths due to the terrorist strikes on September 11 and the thousands of needless deaths due to war, disease and starvation in Afghanistan. It is more difficult to write of suffering, for how can one write of the concrete suffering of the families and friends of those who were killed on September 11? And then there is a kind of abstract suffering: that of many Americans who felt powerless in the face of the terrorist strikes and that of many Muslims of the Third World who continue to feel powerless in a U.S.-dominated world order. Such suffering may be abstract but it should not be overlooked, for it gives birth to the concrete crimes of those who, like Bin Laden, want to be instruments of the "scourge of god".

Who said the plague was a thing of the past?

For here we have "the scourge of god" again. And we have it in two versions. First, and most blatantly, the kind of scourge that people like Bin Laden wish to visit on those they don't like — on Gays or Marxists or Feminists in their own regions, on "Americans" everywhere. But perhaps there is another "scourge of god" — a subtler edition — that informs the general feeling of disinterest many Europeans and Americans and Australians show in the face of death and suffering in the Third World.

Or is this version called the "scourge of the god of free market"? The unseen god that "Third Worlders" are always being asked to worship, who is also the unseen god that protects "First Worlders" with agricultural subsidies, trade monopolies and political hegemony? Is this, finally, a battle between Bin Laden's unseen god and the unseen god of the free market? Is it only a minor skirmish between the terror of the plague of the past and the plague of the terror of the present?

That is part of the answer, but not all.

Another part of the answer brings us back to other aspects of the plague: "social dislocation", and segregation and prejudice. The terror of September 11 was itself an index of social

dislocation. Entire populations have been dislocated from traditional ways of life that ordered their universe. Many of them, especially in the Third World, have realised that political independence is either not forthcoming, or that it is a severely limited factor in the face of the economic domination of the "global" world by businesses and politicians of the rich nations.

September 11 has its roots in this vast dislocation of people, compounded by the fact that 80 per cent of the wealth of the world is still controlled by 10 per cent of its population, mostly living in the rich "West".

The dislocation in itself is not necessarily bad, but the vast socio-economic gulf that exists between individuals and societies turns it into a negative experience for a large number of people. That is the real plague: not terror, but poverty and inequality.

But all plagues have a cure, we are told. This particular plague will be cured if we, in Third World countries, cut down on state expenditure and open our markets to global capital. Never mind the fact that all rich Capitalist countries went through phases of heavy state expenditure and continue to protect their own "weak" sectors.

Some pain, we are told, that's all you need — some pain today to cure a painful future. Restructuring, it is called. There is a long list of countries in South America, Asia and Africa that have taken this treatment. You can hear them howling with pain. September 11 was also the story of this medieval penchant for present pain as a cure for future pain.

And no wonder September 11 unleashed another story of pain as cure. They hit us, we have to teach them a lesson — as an American told me. He had no idea who "they" were and, ignorant as he was of most of American culture and all of American Indian and Black American history, he did not even have much of an idea of who "we" were.

But he had his medieval belief: pain cures pain. So had the Muslims who justified September 11 by referring to the atrocities committed by American-supported forces in other parts of the world.

So today, on the eve of the anniversary of the plague that hit the U.S. on September 11 and continues to sweep in various forms — American or Arab, Islamicist or neo-liberalist — across the world, today that is what I want to say: pain is never a cure for pain. Those who recommend pain for others, those who traffic in pain, those who glorify pain, those who justify pain: these are the people to distrust. There is only one human response to pain of any kind: alleviate it.

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