

Editorial Introduction

Sunil Manghani & Colin Wright

This introduction marks the opening of the very first issue of a new journal. *Situation Analysis* as it appears here, is actually the result of a year of sporadic conversations and ad-hoc meetings between a number of those involved in and contributing to this first issue. The particular context in which we met was the quiet and tidy surrounds of The University of Nottingham (UK) following the shocking events of September 11th, 2001. We each felt a peculiar giddiness in the face of these dramatic images. We were of course not alone in this feeling. Without doubt, in the context of the pervasive, lucrative and highly professionalised 24-hour news services, with their daily diet of live debate and expert commentary, a ‘Media-State of Alert’ can be a fantastic force in itself.



For the small group that emerged there was a perceived and felt need to simply ‘meet-up’, to set aside specific time against all our other commitments to just talk, and find some way of instigating a forum of debate. After numerous partial conversations as we passed each other in the corridors, and various rushed emails, we did meet on a few occasions and found that we shared similarly confused emotions and concerns about these ‘momentous events’. A recurring factor in our conversations was the feeling that there needed to be a way of retaining the obvious emotional and instinctive level of engagement that was in the air. In itself, this emotional response seemed to have something important to say. This journal is the product, then, of a small group of seemingly like-minded individuals, each on the one hand engaging in discussions at a fairly instinctive level, and, on the other, seeking to formalise a commitment to and interest in the mode of debate itself.

This inaugural issue of *Situation Analysis* takes September 11th as its main concern, not least because this has been a dominating article of contemporary global affairs, but equally because it was the impact of this ‘event’ that initiated our project in the first instance. Of course, one year on, it is inevitable that a wealth of material - books, magazine supplements, exhibitions, broadcasts, or new technology productions - will cover all manner of issues in order to relay, re-examine and ‘explain’ the series of dramatic and devastating incidents that quite literally shook the residents of New York city, but also more metaphorically the rest of the world. What characterises these materials, statements, and analyses is perhaps simply the need and want of ‘response’. Just how to respond *responsibly* to a series of acts of terrorism witnessed on the morning of this particular September 11th has continued to be an important matter of query. However, this issue of *Situation Analysis* is not seeking to further ‘document’ or indeed commemorate the events of September 11th. As Mitchell points out in his contribution here, knowing the ‘right’ thing to say in this ‘moment of “hot” historical time’ is not at all easy, perhaps not even desirable.



In Berlin this summer, we came across an attempt to articulate a response to the events of September 11th which raised many of the concerns underlying this inaugural issue. Indeed, the photographic exhibition entitled ‘here is new york’* is described by its organisers as a ‘response to the World Trade Center tragedy, and to the unprecedented flood of images that resulted from it’. Collecting together images ‘submitted by anyone and everyone’, whether photojournalists, professional photographers, or indeed amateurs and passers-by, the exhibition displays these snapshots anonymously and without a frame, the intention being to ‘preserve for historical purposes the broadest possible view of this event and its aftermath’. The organisers therefore aspire both to being inclusive and to writing a history. The archive continues to grow as people are encouraged to send in more images, and the exhibition, which has travelled both in the United States and in Europe, has proved remarkably popular. It was clear to us that of the different exhibitions then showing at the highly regarded Martin Gropius Museum, it was this small display of photographs - hung out like laundry on a line - that attracted most attention. The pondering, staring faces looking up at these images portrayed a real sense of connection and currency.

Just what such a connection might be understood to be, is no doubt difficult to fully explain. And yet there has undoubtedly been, and continues to be, a definite and palpable experience of engagement with September 11th. Whether or not the nature of this engagement remains ultimately untheorisable, it is evident that response, and an experience of (or the feeling of a *need* for) response, is unlikely ever to vanish - indeed it would most likely be to our detriment if it did. Perhaps then it is possible to broaden what is meant by theory and critique by articulating what happens when both are brought face to face with the events of our lives, and the lives of others, whether near or far. In respect of such concerns, it was the subtitle of this particular exhibition, ‘a democracy of photographs’ (or in the German, simply images [Bilden]), that was of particular interest - for indeed, what would it really mean for this collection of photographs to be a display, as the organisers assert, ‘in the truly democratic style’?

There is, undoubtedly, something cathartic about these images, having come full circle from a dramatic image captured by the media lens, to then being re-asserted as individual pieces of photographic media, and finally being placed within a further process of representation, that of the gallery space with its associated materials and cultural meanings. Yet, there is evidently an instance of instability over just what democracy can be. For there was something all too familiar about these scenes of terror, and it was perhaps this familiarity - notably described as being ‘just like the movies’ - that cut so deep. Thus, the boundary of any ‘democracy’ of these images must extend beyond simply those who were able to bear witness to the tragedy of events on the ground, towards acknowledging the very images chosen by the terrorists themselves - if only because the photographs displayed in the gallery necessarily originated with the images already constructed by the terrorist’s acts. In some senses, it was the very form of spectacle on display in the gallery that was *appropriated* for a deadly strike of terror on that September morning. For us, the exhibition underlined the notion that democracy can reach a paradox

* For further details see: <http://www.hereisnewyork.org/>

in being too transparent, too familiar, and too graspable. It is perhaps no real surprise then, that in the face of such transparency there has arisen an ever more polarised field of debate. Of increasing importance then - at least in terms of a radical critique - is surely to retain hold of a different mode of openness, to keep afloat a genuine commitment to an open-ended mode of critique. This then is what is at stake for any form of contemporary 'situation analysis': how is it possible in the face of an expansive tele-vised and 'shared' clarity, and in the advent of dramatic 'certainties' such as the terror attacks on America, to maintain a committed and imaginative critical practice?

This issue of *Situation Analysis* examines these and other questions from various angles, and with differing emphases. It should be noted that the selected articles represent various periods from the year following the September 11th attacks, ranging from the height of the Anthrax scare in America to the recent build up towards war with Iraq. Yet no attempt has been made to collate the pieces in chronological order, since, again, we do not aim to 'tell the story' of September 11th and its aftermath (others have done this almost *ad nauseam*), but rather to tell the story of the telling of that story.

Thus, W.J.T. Mitchell's opening article asks the crucial question as to what might constitute the most appropriate moment for critique: should we wait for the 'dust to settle' before risking an analysis, or should we speak out immediately, intuitively, and emotionally, from the very midst of confusion? In 'Crisis and Critique', Mitchell manages to describe a fundamental assumption behind *Situation Analysis* itself: that a truly relevant critical theory cannot allow itself the luxury of a contemplative or distanced engagement with unfolding events, but must, as it were, get its hands dirty in the vagaries and vicissitudes of the moment.

Susan Buck-Morss performs just such an analysis by contextualising September 11th within the forces of globalization. She writes optimistically of a Spinozist multitude which might cohere into a global community by fusing radicalism with an inclusive cosmopolitanism: such a global community might then serve to dissolve the 'us and them' logic prevalent since September 11th while tolerating and indeed embracing difference. Buck-Morss also makes an important distinction between two Americas, a vibrant democratic ideal on the one hand, and a massively powerful international force on the other.

Nicholas Mirzoeff's contribution traces the same forces of globalization highlighted by Buck-Morss, but concentrates on the increasing influence of global capital over practices and technologies of incarceration. Mirzoeff suggests that September 11th provided the moral springboard for an even more radical regulation and restriction of the movements of labour-power, creating a transnational penal system whose function is purely economic.

If Mirzoeff deals with what is explicitly hidden from view (behind the closed doors of prisons), Norman Solomon gives an insider's perspective on what is hidden within that which is most deliberately and indeed dramatically visible, namely, the global media. As an American and a journalist, Solomon is in a position to lay bare the censorship at the heart of the *constructions* of September 11th and the subsequent war on Afghanistan, and to chart the unprecedented levels of state-intervention into the major U.S. news networks. For a culture which conflates reality with the televisual (and this of course by no means relates to America alone), Solomon asks whether events which never reach our screens *really* happen?

Colin Wright explores one of the symptoms of this media construction of September 11th: a tendency to imply that the attacks came completely ‘out of the blue’, and thus that they had neither cause, nor anything significant to communicate. Wright contests this construction by equating the terrorist attacks with hate speech, in order to acknowledge both that America was, and is, the victim of hatred, but also that the terrorists had a message to relay. Wright also suggests that intellectuals on the left have perhaps had too rapid recourse to previous theoretical paradigms, whereas the real challenge and obligation of September 11th is to “think the new”.

Following a presentation given at the ‘Study Day on Hardt & Negri’s “Empire”’ (20/06/02), hosted by the Postgraduate School of Critical Theory & Cultural Studies, *Situation Analysis* invited Rowan Wilson to submit an open commentary on Negri and September 11th. His response usefully situates the reactions to September 11th within a history of leftist politics, while managing to look forward by interrogating the question of how best to articulate a resistance to the growing likelihood of war with Iraq. Contra Slavo Zizek’s recent advocacy of a return to Leninist representational politics, Wilson argues for a more direct form of protest.

Arthur Piper’s ludically titled ‘It Would be Nice to be a Terrorist’ examines the trajectory of the concept of terrorism in the thought of Jean Baudillard, from his early critique of Marxism in the 70’s to his response to September 11th. Piper concludes with the difficult question of how we might begin to acknowledge modes of terrorism which are closer to home.

R. Danielle Egan provides a treatment of the ‘discourse of anthrax’ that arose soon after the immediate events of September 11th. She charts the rise in cultural panic which compounds a reductive equation of the Middle Eastern body with the viral threat of Terrorism, a panic which obscures a betrayal of democracy, as well as the very real effects of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ used in the name of democracy.

Finally, and with respect to the longer term intentions of this journal, the closing article by Sunil Manghani examines the ‘nature’ and genesis of this project both in terms of the specific practicalities of coming together as a group and developing a new journal, and, at a more abstract level, in terms of a perceived ‘inheritance’ of the practice of ‘situation analysis’.

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Sunil Manghani & Colin Wright, October 2002.