Revolutionary nihilism of the kind embodied by al-Qaeda is not a throwback to the past but part of what it means to be modern. John Gray reviews the reaction to 11 September and argues that Americans, like the rest of us, must learn to live with such shocks.

The events of 11 September may have changed very little in the real world, but it destroyed the conventional understanding of what it means to be modern. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, al-Qaeda was routinely described as a medieval throwback, an army of fanatical religious warriors held together by hatred of modern values. In fact, the evidence that has since emerged suggests that al-Qaeda is ultra-modern. In organisation, it seems to be a hybrid of the semi-virtual business corporations that were so fashionable in the Nineties and the loosely linked cellular structures that run the world's drug cartels. Like the most advanced businesses, al-Qaeda is a worldwide network that is only vestigially territorial. Though some states may have sheltered it, it is not under the control of any of them. Thriving on weak government and the mercurial mobility of stateless wealth, it is a perfect embodiment of globalisation.

If al-Qaeda's organisation is unequivocally modern, so is its fundamentalist outlook. Fundamentalism arises along with modernity, in societies whose traditional ways are no longer viable. In the Middle Ages, the Church was an established institution, with an acknowledged, if sometimes bitterly contested, structure of authority. In contrast, al-Qaeda belongs in a distinctively modern revolutionary tradition that rejects all established authority. In late 19th-century Europe, some sections of the revolutionary movement turned to what they called propaganda by deed. With little confidence in the power of persuasion, they preached indiscriminate violence. Whereas orthodox Marxists relied on history to sweep away the regimes they hated, a section of anarchists and populists resorted to spectacular acts of terrorism. These revolutionaries did not look back to any earlier society, and their vision of the future was extremely hazy. More interested in the act of destruction than in improving society, terrorism was for them a triumph of the will over a corrupt world. Al-Qaeda has far more in common with these modern European nihilists than it does with anything in medieval times. If Osama Bin Laden has a precursor, it is Sergei Nechaev, the prototypical 19th-century Russian revolutionary who, when asked which members of the House of Romanov should be killed, replied: "All of them."

Al-Qaeda's closest affinities are with 19th-century revolutionary nihilism, not medieval religion, but that has not made it any easier to understand. The combination of revolutionary nihilism and religious fundamentalism does not square with any of the theories of modernisation that we have inherited from the Enlightenment. To be sure, Enlightenment thinkers advanced many views of modernity, often incompatible. For the French Positivists, Auguste Comte and Henri St-Simon, a modern society was a hierarchical technocracy. For Marx, it was classless and egalitarian. For Fukuyama, it meant "global democratic capitalism". Quite different as they are, these visions of the future nevertheless have some common features that explain why they are all non-starters. In each, religion is expected to dwindle in significance as society becomes progressively more secular and the world's divergent cultures meld into a universal humanist civilisation. But the needs that are expressed in religion are not so easily repressed. Th
ey are primordially human, and return within the militant political faiths to which the Enlightenment gave birth. In the early 20th century, these needs were expressed in communism. More recently, they were vented in the cheap little religion of the free market. Both promise that history's tragic conflicts will be left behind, as the whole of humankind comes together in a universal consensus on values.

Al-Qaeda did more than demolish a familiar landmark and kill thousands of civilians. It shattered an entire view of the world. Yet, in an impressive demonstration of cognitive dissonance, most commentators have reacted by looking to the past. The global free market was a by-product of peace and 11 September the outbreak of a new era of war, but the tub-thumpers for globalisation have gone on banging their antique drums. The attack on New York and Washington had nothing to do with the flaws of American society, but it has led to the re-emergence of an old breed of anti-Americanism, reminiscent of the Sixties in its vulgarity and rancour. As for the broad swathe of opinion that thinks itself progressive, it is completely disoriented. In its view of the world, religious allegiances should be a purely private matter, no more a deciding force in world affairs than the choice of ethnic cuisine. At the start of the 21st century, however, war and religion are once again inextricably intertwined. In the progressive view of things, the future must lie with some kind of global governance. But if the conduct of the war has shown anything, it is that transnational institutions count for next to nothing when the world's greatest power is attacked. Geopolitics, not global governance, is the name of the game.

If progressives are aghast at the turn of events, they are not alone. The western intelligentsia as a whole is more confused and marginal than it has been for generations. In the Thirties, thinking people could reach for their Marx or Keynes in an effort to understand the present. During the cold war, they could pull John Dewey or Karl Popper down from the shelf. In the post-cold war period, they flicked through the musty pages of Hayek in search of illumination. None of these thinkers has anything of interest to say about the circumstances we face today. All of them subscribed to the Enlightenment faith that as societies become more modern, they become more alike, accepting the same secular values and the same view of the world. That faith was always questionable. Today it is incredible. If now we reach to our shelves for books that can help us to understand what happened on 11 September, we find almost nothing.

That is not to say there is any shortage of reading matter. Publishers are scrambling over each other to fill the shops with books in what is a new genre of contemporary crisis. By far the most useful are by historians and area specialists. Among these, Ahmed Rashid's Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in central Asia is an indispensable guide to the geo-strategic background of the Afghan conflict. Rashid's earlier book Taliban: the story of the Afghan warlords became required reading for legions of journalists and diplomats, as they struggled to make sense of the labyrinthine enmities and alliances that lie behind current conflicts in the region, and this successor volume may prove equally canonical. Based in Lahore, Rashid has too much local knowledge and too deep a sense of the shifts and turns of history to imagine that any simple theory of modernisation can fit the needs of the peoples of central Asia. Under Soviet rule, the subtle and tolerant Islamic culture of central Asia was suppressed in a brutal attempt to reshape the region on a primitive western secular model. Today that model is dust and ashes, and the region is a site of conflict among rival versions of radical Islam. At the same time, a version of the Great Game has been resumed, with the world's oil companies vying for control of the region's natural resources.

The struggle in central Asia has nothing to do with the Enlightenment ideologies that defined 20th-century conflict. As in earlier times, it centres on religion, territory and the control of the scarce necessities of life. The idea that a new order was forming, in which these historic sources of conflict would be mediated in an embryonic world government, has been revealed for what it always was: an idle dream. As the Middle
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Fred Halliday reaches a similar though notably more qualified conclusion in his sober and balanced Two Hours that Shook the World. The underlying reasons why rivalry among states will remain the moving force of international relations are set out in Paul Hirst's War and Power in the 21st Century, a short book written before 11 September that is worth more than a truckload of the ephemera that have appeared in the aftermath of the attack. Hirst's analysis will be attacked for its pessimism. In fact, it is full of rare common sense. As an example, he notes that transnational institutions depend for their authority on the support they receive from sovereign states. They are powerless when faced with the intransigence or indifference of the most powerful states. This is a simple point, but it seems too subtle for those who look to bodies such as the UN to usher in a new world order.

In the wave of post-September books, studies of terrorism are a thriving sub-genre. Partly because its analysis parallels that of a powerful faction in the Bush administration that supports a widening of the war to include Iraq, Laurie Mylroie's The War Against America -- a revised version of a study published two years ago--is among the most important. In Mylroie's view, terrorism on the scale that produced the events of 11 September can only be state-sponsored, the work of hostile intelligence agencies rather than of loose global non-state networks. She writes that "a state is behind the September 11th assault and the biological attacks that followed"--just as it was, she believes, in the attempt on the World Trade Center in 1993. In each case, she thinks, Iraqi intelligence was responsible. Among those who study these matters for a living, this seems to be a minority view, with recent statements by CIA analysts (reported in the New York Times and elsewhere) suggesting there is no evidence that Iraq has engaged in terrorist operations against the US for nearly a decade and no reason to think that a change of regime in Baghdad will prevent terrorism against the US.

Toppling Saddam Hussein maybe necessary to halt the development of weapons of mass destruction, but history shows that terrorism is not so easily eradicated. Subduing terrorism in Malaya took the British at least 15 years, during which the country was firmly under political control -- unlike the "rogue states" from which some in the Bush administration believe the current wave of terrorism mainly emanates. Again, anti-terrorist measures have been in force in Ireland for decades, side by side with recurrent political initiatives. Much has been achieved, but no one could say that the terrorist threat has been removed. The same is true in the Basque Country. Despite decades of resolute effort, terrorism has not been eradicated even in a zone of peace and strong government such as the European Union.

The difficulties facing the global campaign against terrorism are much greater. As Caleb Carr notes in his illuminating study, The Lessons of Terror, today's terrorists are a far more formidable bunch than the anarchists of the late 19th century. Contrary to Carr, however, that is not because they are sponsored by states but because states are in some ways weaker than they used to be. Western Europe contains many strong states, which are likely to become even stronger as they extend surveillance of their citizens and exercise greater control over their borders; but these states exist in an international context that contains many failed states and zones of semi-anarchy, not only in places such as Somalia and Afghanistan but also in Europe's backyard, in countries such as Albania, Chechnya and former Yugoslavia. The situation of the US is not fundamentally different. The crucial advantage possessed by terrorists today is that they operate in a time of globalisation and failed states. Neither globalisation nor failed states are new. What is
unprecedented is the combination of the two -- a conjunction that has allowed terrorist violence to be effectively privatised and projected worldwide. By moving their resources around in the vast ocean of offshore wealth created by financial deregulation, using informal banking systems and links with globally organised crime, organisations such as al-Qaeda have put themselves beyond easy reach of governments.

The failure to track the growth of a new terrorist threat was part of a much larger inability to grasp the realities of globalisation that goes all the way back to the Christian-Enlightenment faith in history as a teleological process ending in a species-wide civilisation. This is the creed of all globalisers, and it lay behind their most disastrous experiment to date - the botched transition from central planning in the former Soviet Union. This ruinous episode has a double relevance today. In the first place, neoliberal shock therapy merely accelerated the disintegration not only of the economy but also of the state. The result was to flood the world with cast-offs from the vast Soviet war machine, including not only materials and equipment well suited for use by terrorists, but also thousands of research scientists who found themselves unemployed or impoverished. There is another, larger lesson. The failed Soviet transition illustrates the continuing hold on western policy-makers of an Enlightenment faith in utopian social engineering. In any realistic assessment, there was never any prospect of reforming and stabilising the Soviet system as Mikhail Gorbachev proposed, or of a smooth, swift transition to a western-style economy of the kind projected during Boris Yeltsin's early years in power. As Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski have shown in The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms, the communist legacy of corruption and criminality was too strong and the legitimacy of the post-communist regime too shallow for either transformation to be remotely feasible.

Concluding their magisterial and irreplaceable study, Reddaway and Glinksi observe: "Russia in the 20th century has demonstrated to the outside world the dehumanising extremes of two different utopian visions based on economic determinism and designed for global use: first, bureaucratic state bolshevism with a command economy and a one-party state; and now, market bolshevism." Russia may yet achieve the successful modernisation that has eluded it since Peter the Great, but, if it does, it will be through developing hybrid economic and political forms that are suited to its unique and in some ways uniquely unfortunate -- history, not any westernising project of utopian social engineering.

This is a lesson that has yet to be learnt regarding the Middle East. If there are coherent policies for the region, they continue to be based on the belief that it can be remade on a western economic model. But this is an article of faith, not a result of rational inquiry. Egypt maybe able to reshape its economy in some such way, but stretches credulity to believe that any kind of social engineering can turn Saudi Arabia -- with its complete dependency on a single depleting natural resource, exploding population and fundamentalist education system -- into a western-style economy. In any event, who is to say that those Middle Eastern countries which can remake themselves on a western model will be better off by doing so? Is the economic system that produced Enron so hugely superior to every other kind? Great efforts have been made to restructure the world economy on the free market model. But is the result a system that is sustainable? Along with worsening deflation in Japan, the after-effects of the American debt bubble could leave the world mired in depression for years. Evangelists for the Washington consensus rant on about the benefits of worldwide economic integration. They are less forthcoming on the risks and cost of a synchronised global collapse. A universal free market is no more likely to be without destabilising booms and busts than the national free markets of the past. In that case, might it not be wise to encourage a more diversified global economy? Why not support the efforts of some Muslim countries to develop their own economic systems? I have some doubts as to the viability of Islamic banking. But who can say that it
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Accelerating a shift that began before 11 September, the US is turning away from its recent infatuation with the free market and back to its long-standing preoccupation with national security. This new American realism marks a large advance on the messianic globalism that preceded it. But it is not without dangers. It coexists with a continuing belief that, with the backing of the country's stupendous military power, America's values can still become universal. The lesson of 11 September is that this is a dangerous fantasy. There will not be a universal civilisation of any kind in the foreseeable future. Globalisation is only the entropic drift of technology, interacting unpredictably with divergent cultures and primordial human needs. Revolutionary nihilism of the kind embodied in al-Qaeda is not a throwback to the past but a part of what it means to be modern. Terrorism must be deterred and subdued, and wherever possible its causes should be alleviated. It cannot be eradicated. Like the rest of us, American s are going to have to get used to living with it.

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