

**WHY ROOT CAUSES ARE IMPORTANT**  
(Published title: **We Ignore Misery at Our Peril**)

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Toronto Globe and Mail, September 26, 2001

What we urgently need is subtlety of thought. We need to be able to make crucial distinctions, for instance between culpability and innocence, combatant and noncombatant, and the legitimate and illegitimate uses of force. If we make such distinctions, it's more likely that we'll guide ourselves successfully through this crisis. Sadly, though, subtlety is the first casualty of anger.

The debate surrounding the events of September 11 is being clouded by sloppy logic and analysis in the haste to say something -- anything - that makes sense of the situation. One issue that has become clouded is whether it's reasonable to talk about terrorism's "root causes." Some commentators declare that any discussion of root causes legitimizes terrorism by making excuses for it. Others suggest that people who want to examine root causes are arguing, essentially, that we shouldn't take punitive action because it won't work; we should act on the root causes instead.

But these are grade-school non-sequiturs. Let's start with the first: Do we excuse or legitimize crime when we examine its causes? Of course not! And the same holds true for terrorism. We can explain why a person committed a crime -- say, a murder -- by pointing to the factors that caused the person to do it. We may even trace these factors far back into the person's history -- to their upbringing, their childhood economic circumstances and the like. But this rarely keeps us from holding the person morally responsible for the crime. We can, in other words, examine and acknowledge the root causes of the person's behavior, without letting them off the moral hook. The two issues -- of explanation and responsibility -- are distinct.

One would think this is all pretty obvious. So why do some commentators object so vociferously to any discussion of terrorism's root causes? I suspect it's because they don't like where this discussion may lead. They seem quite willing to accept some kinds of explanations of the latest barbarity -- for instance, that the terrorists were deprived, mad, or the product of a particularly wicked sub-culture of radical Islam. Such explanations aren't very threatening because

they locate the cause in the nature of the perpetrators or their group. What really infuriates these commentators is any attempt to look at factors further afield -- especially those that might lie in the structure and functioning of the planet's economy, politics, and society. Why? Because such factors could implicate us in the West.

So, these commentators declare any consideration of root causes to be off limits. And they throw calumnies at anyone who raises these issues.

Yet by keeping us from learning about the origins of the threats we face, this attitude could easily make us less safe over the long run. Until we understand the sources of terrorism and do something about them, we can arm ourselves to the teeth, rampage across the planet with our militaries, suspend many of our civil liberties, and still not protect ourselves from this menace.

Now the second argument. Are those who want to examine the root causes of terrorism saying we should delay our efforts to track down and punish those responsible for this latest attack? Again, of course not.

The analogy of a terrible illness, like cancer, is useful here. We must excise the social pathology of terrorism - which means we must identify, track down, and destroy the culprits -- just as we cut out a cancerous tumor. But when we're dealing with a critical illness, the task usually doesn't end there. We also want to change the underlying factors - such as smoking -- that make cancer more likely to emerge in the first place.

What are terrorism's underlying factors? They are many, they combine in complex ways, and they vary from one incident to another.

In the Middle East and South Asia, they include a demographic explosion that has produced a huge bulge of urbanized, unemployed young men -- the most dangerous social group of all, according to many social scientists. They also include environmental stresses -- especially shortages of cropland and fresh water - that have crippled farming in the countryside and forced immense numbers of people into squalid urban slums, where they are easy fodder for fanatics. The impact of these factors is compounded by chronic conflict (including the Israeli/Palestinian and Afghan conflicts) that have shattered economies and created

vast refugee camps; by the region's corrupt, incompetent, and undemocratic governments; and by an international political and economic system that's more concerned about Realpolitik, oil supply, and the interests of global finance than about the well-being of the region's human beings

The receptivity of young men to terror's radical message is enormously increased by this legacy of conflict, dislocation, and -- yes -- poverty in the region. From the refugee camps in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province to the squalid streets of Gaza, we have ignored -- for far too long -- festering wounds of discontent.

At this point, though, many commentators stumble into yet another mistake: they say that such dislocation and poverty in distant lands can't be among the root causes of terrorism, because the perpetrators of the New York atrocity apparently lived among us and were relatively educated and wealthy. But this argument assumes that people act only in response to their direct, personal experiences, which is absurd.

Sometimes terrorists are recruited directly from communities in misery. This seems to be the case with many of the Palestinian suicide bombers that plague Israel. Sometimes, though, they are recruited from wealthier and more educated groups -- precisely because they can penetrate our societies more easily.

These people can still powerfully identify with communities elsewhere that they believe have been exploited, victimized, reduced to crushing poverty, or otherwise treated with disrespect. In fact, their relative wealth and education can reinforce a twisted sense of responsibility to do something for their suffering brothers and sisters. In the case of radical Islamic terrorists, such grievances are often expressed as anger over American policy toward Israel and Iraq and American support for "un-Islamic" Middle Eastern governments.

People who are miserable, or who strongly identify with those who are miserable, look for an explanation of that misery. Rightly or wrongly, they often focus their anger on those who are doing better. Inevitably, in a large group, some will be susceptible to wild and fantastic ideas that say violence is the solution.

As the disparities of wealth and opportunity on our planet widen, this problem is certain to get worse. We live in a seething, discontented world, and we ignore that fact at our peril.