



**Representing, commemorating and memorizing terrorist attacks:
discussing the US and French experiences**

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Representing, commemorating, and memorizing terrorist attacks: Discussing the US and French experiences

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Alice M. Greenwald

Clifford Chanin

National September 11 Memorial & Museum, USA

Henry Rousso

CNRS, France

Michel Wieviorka

EHESS, France

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

How do societies and states represent the historical, moral, and political weight of the terrorist attacks they have had to face? Having suffered in recent years from numerous terrorist attacks on their soil originating from jihadist movements, and often led by actors who were also their own citizens, France and the United States have set up—or seek to do so—places of memory whose functions, conditions of creation, modes of operation, and nature of the messages sent may vary. Three of the main protagonists and initiators of two museum-memorial projects linked to terrorist attacks have agreed to deliver their visions of the role and of the political, social, and historical context in which these projects have emerged. Allowing to observe similarities and differences between the American and French approach, this interview sheds light on the place of

Corresponding author:

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, Centre for International Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, Centre Building-Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: ma.adraoui@gmail.com

memory and feeling in societies struck by tragic events and seeking to cure their ills through memory and commemoration.

Keywords

commemoration, France, memorials, memories, museum, terrorism, United States, violence

Terrorist attacks always leave traces, human, and moral of course, but also historical and memorial. The way in which a society, but also a political power, apprehends the legacy of the deep traumas of terrorist attacks is proving to be a powerful subject of study for anyone interested in the place and representations of violence in our contemporary societies. More specifically, through the social, political, and historical genesis of museums and memorials dedicated to the memory of victims of terrorist attacks, a society suggests its relationship to death, crime, trauma but also its way of representing the traces of these events, and its way of exorcizing them. The representation of terrorist violence is therefore a social fact in its own right.

For *Violence: An International Journal*, the main key players of two memorial museums, in two countries that have suffered bloody terrorist attacks, have agreed to exchange views on their ongoing work: Alice Greenwald (AG) and Clifford Chanin (CC), from the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, which was built on the rubble of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center that fell in New York 20 years ago, and French historian Henry Rousso (HR), who presides over the mission of prefiguration for a French memorial museum in memory of the victims of terrorism. By combining their perspectives and experiences, this interview traces the genesis and the conditions for producing a societal and political perspective on terrorist violence. By interweaving their work with constant questionings by virtue of which certain choices were preferred to others, the protagonists of this interview allow us to see, on one hand, how a representation of suffering and trauma is put in place, but also, on the other hand, what the latter is trying to convey as a political message. This discussion took place in November 2020 and was moderated by Michel Wieviorka (MW), co-editor-in-chief of the journal, and Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (MAA), one of its associate editors.

MAA: You did know each other before the interview. What kind of links have you forged, both personal and intellectual, on the basis of these two projects? And what sort of national and international networking have you set with other memorials and initiatives elsewhere in the world?

AG: Henry and I first met around 2008 when we were both involved with the Caen Peace Memorial. They were preparing the first European exhibition on 9/11, in collaboration with what was already an international network. The fact that Cliff and I, and Mark Schaming, who was with us from the New York State Museum, were brought in to be part of a dialogue about this, really reflected the global sensibility of the project. It also reflected that the event that was being commemorated—9/11, an event that happened to the

United States in the United States—was in fact a global moment, which was actually the title of the exhibition.

So the recognition of common perspectives—or shared perspectives—was built in right at the start. At the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, we have conscientiously pursued relationships and networking with other communities that have endured either terrorist events or events of extreme violence. Sometimes, we also provide the latter with some pro bono consulting services. Over the years, in addition to the project that Henry is leading in France [the “mission de préfiguration du musée-mémorial du terrorisme”¹] and that Cliff is now involved in, we have advised on projects in Oslo-Utøya for the horrible massacre that took place in 2011. We have also worked with communities in Newtown, Connecticut, on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial, in Orlando for the Pulse Memorial [around the attack perpetrated against the Pulse nightclub], and in England, around the 2017 attack that took place at Manchester Arena. Any number of communities have reached out to us for guidance and assistance, as they try to navigate the challenges of how to commemorate these horrific events. So, I would say that the opportunity for a global and international network of professionals is not only timely, but it is actually already in an informal way happening.

HR: I indeed met Alice and Clifford in 2008, for the Caen Peace Memorial, and then again in 2009. That year, we went with [French historian] Denis Peschanski and a whole group of researchers to New York. It is one of my most vivid memories about these issues there because there was still the hole, the big hole. Some years later, in 2014, I was invited by a colleague of mine at Columbia University who told me to come visit the new 9/11 museum at the memorial, which actually had opened a few weeks before. She said to me: “You are French, and you are a French scholar, a specialist in memory. When you will see this museum, you will be able, more than anyone else, to criticize what they have done.” The recollection of my first visit there is very fresh to my mind as the experience of it is of great importance for what I’m doing now. I remember not just visiting the memorial but also the museum and especially the historical part of the museum, which is the core of the monument, and I was a little critical of some of the options you chose there. But now that I’ve visited it several times, especially with Cliff—we went to New York with part of the current team [from the preparatory workshop on the French memorial] in September 2019—I have a completely different view on the museum. I still think that there is a difference of approach, and it will probably be visible when we will finish the French one, which is supposed to pay much more attention to history and politics. I do not say that your option is bad and our option is good, of course. That would be ridiculous, but we do not have exactly the same cultural approach.

AG: Absolutely.

- CC: In the 2008–2009 period, we continued working as a bi-national and even international group through a grant from the French government for a couple of years of research and conferences, which created this partnership between our museum and the future French memorial. And with New York University and the CNRS [the French National Centre for Scientific Research], there were academic and practitioner counterparts on both sides. And that really was a way to develop a shared understanding, but also an understanding of the differences in approach that the two perspectives gave.
- HR: The French project is actually leaning in a completely different way from the one of the 9/11. The French one will not be about a one-off event and it won't be built in a specific place related to a specific attack. On the contrary, we will look for a place with no history of terrorism. We wish to establish and build something which will symbolize all the victims of terrorism in France, at least from the last fifty years. However, if the museum will be centered on France and its citizens, because of the global dimension of numerous attacks, it will also look at these events from an international perspective, from the 1960s to the present day. And we had to hold ourselves back because many different kinds of terrorist events took place in contemporary French history and elsewhere. So the museum will not only include the Islamic attacks, which form the last and most lethal sequence of this history, but also all the other forms of terrorism.² The project will then be completely different from that of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. The part dedicated to politics, to history, to political issues will be much more important, as far as I am concerned, in the French museum than it is in the New York one. However, we are truly benefiting from your own experiences. Cliff's presence in our scientific committee in France is invaluable. All the time I turn to him and ask: "What would you do in the same situation?"
- AG: I definitely agree with the fact that there will be a difference of approach between the two museums. I remember vividly one episode in 2008 when Cliff and I were at a meeting with the CNRS: scholars and historians were asking what our storyline would be, what our approach would be—and although it was early in the process for us, we had a pretty clear sense of where we were headed—and there was an intense response from the French historians. For them, we were somehow abrogating our responsibility in creating this memorial museum by not criticizing the role of the United States in the invasion of Iraq, which was not being given enough coverage in the museum. I was somewhat taken aback by what was a very intense exchange. But our premise for this museum was that this would be a site-specific institution, dedicated to narrating the events of a single day and its ongoing repercussions, which are not insignificant globally now almost 20 years later.

We were tasked to tell a story that was also commemorative; this was not just a history museum. It was meant to be a memorial museum, with memorial being

an emphatic adjective. And from the beginning, five years after the event took place, we did not have the benefit of historiography: there were no volumes of history texts contextualizing 9/11 yet, providing the perspective of history on the topics that we were thinking about including and crystallizing into a physical exhibition. That meant that every decision we made as a museum development team put us in the position of being historiographers. We were choosing and curating the historical narrative, the way the story would be told.

The decision we made at that time was that this would be a story not so much of an event as told by historians objectively, but it would be the story of the human experience of that historical event, acknowledging that 9/11 was a moment of profound historical importance, but that it was too soon for us to opine on the meaning, because the meaning of the story wasn't over. It was still evolving five years after 9/11, it's still evolving now 20 years after. So, we felt that the point of entry for this museum would be the human voice, the human experience. And you know, 9/11 was widely documented in any number of media. You had people calling one another and leaving voicemails, you had radio transmissions between first responders, you had cockpit voice recorders, you had people calling into radio stations from the street watching, as the towers were burning and then collapsed; there was just an inordinate amount of audio documentation, video documentation, email documentation and all of it was in the voice of the moment, of the present witness. That's why we decided to structure the museum experience from the vantage point of the human perception of an experience as it was taking place. This would be the point of entry for our public.

CC: If the French project hasn't landed yet, I've come to see that there are certain common elements in spite of different approaches, and it has to do with what Alice was just describing: both of these museums are and will be to some extent what the French called *musée de société*, that is to say a museum that describes the impact of these events in very personal terms. Societies may react differently but there are common elements in spite of the fact that the two museums projects started from very different original points.

MW

and MAA: And then, what about now?

AG: Now, 20 years later, we have young people coming in with no memory of this event. For the first several years the museum was open, the vast majority of our visitors, millions of visitors a year, were people who had this memory ingrained in their consciousness. It was witnessed by 2 billion people on a single day at the same time, an unprecedented, globally-experienced, shared event. But now we have a generation coming in that doesn't have that memory. What we're finding is that the choice to present this history from the point of view of the human story, the personal narrative, actually resonates

with people who didn't have the experience, because they can connect to the fear, the shock, the sense of loss, the sense of confusion, all of which are human emotions that are known and recognizable. While the experience of the museum contextualizes this human experience within the historical antecedents of 9/11—the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing, for example, and the rise of al-Qaeda—it is above all a context that is meant to help the visitor understand and measure their emotional journey as they go through the museum.

- CC: Also 9/11 happened at a time in history, when we were at the beginning of the digital revolution, and so the kinds of materials that we could incorporate into the museum, which can bring you into a much more intimate connection with the victims and the participants, those materials really began to be created as a new archival source for museums around that time. Now, museums that are going to document these kinds of events and reflect on them, as the French museum will, have a set of materials to really bring you inside an event in a way that was not possible before. That has a transformative impact, not just on what museums can present, but on how memorial museums will see their role because of the ability to go inside of these events in a way that wasn't possible before.
- MW: Could you expand a little more on this very specific articulation between a memorial and a museum?
- HR: There are a lot of memorials dedicated to terrorist attacks all over the world. But there are very few museums that are both memorials and museums, like the New York and Paris initiatives. I can't imagine that you, in New York, would have built just a memorial or a museum without any interpretation center. You were probably mainly influenced by the US Holocaust Memorial, which is not a memorial actually and much more a museum.
- AG: It is a museum that incorporates a memorial actually.
- HR: One of the main reasons we are building a museum—and that is why they called on historians and many other kinds of experts—is because it is unimaginable to build a memorial without a minimum of explanation, without a minimum amount of knowledge visitors can refer to. Museums are not just places where you show things; they are places where you are constructing, where you elaborate a narrative, and this narrative sometimes is not already available in scientific literature. I think for terrorism this is more or less the case. The history of terrorism, in a general way, is not complete; it is not developed for example at the same level as Holocaust history. So, this new museum will probably help to construct a new scientific field of thought.

Furthermore, when we talk about 9/11, it is history, but it is not over. It's never over. But still it is history, a global event that is behind us. What we are doing in France is very specific: we are thinking of the museum as a process which is still going on. When Samuel Paty, a teacher near Paris was beheaded, we stopped working. We didn't know what to do, we had a kind of shock. Because what's the need to do what we are doing? We need to fight terrorism, we need to find a way to take care of victims, and yet we are building a museum while people are being killed on the streets. This is one of the major problems we have when building this museum.

MW

and MAA: Could you elaborate more on the differences that you see between the 9/11 Memorial & Museum and the French project for the victims of terrorism?

HR:

Alice said that the 9/11 Memorial & Museum is based on the stories of human experience. And, of course, this is something we'll try to do. We simply can't avoid this aspect. The only difference is that our museum is not just about the human experience of one attack, it is about the human experience of a history of 50 years. So, for example, just to be very concrete: we have a lot of material, archives, testimonies about November 13—which is more or less our 9/11, our traumatizing collective event. But one of the challenges we face is to document and to address many, many, many other attacks. So if our project will be based on individual human experiences and testimonies, it will also narrate a collective experience. And it is more difficult to focus on just human experience when you have to deal with such a number of different kinds of terrorism.

To come back to what Cliff was saying, one of the common points between our museum experiences is that they are not museums in the traditional sense. Yes, they are *musées d'histoire et de société* [museums of history and society]. What I remember when I visited the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in 2009 is that you had this room with teddy bears and all these kinds of objects. And I was struck by what Cliff told me at that time about this very experience: when they put these objects into the museum, many people protested. They wanted to keep them in a mundane office in New York, secluded from society. And yet, we're doing exactly the same. We will try to gather objects especially from the victims, from their associations. In France the conception of a museum is very rigid and if you don't set up the collection in a very specific way, you are not a museum. For example, I tried to explain to the Ministry of Culture that we're building a very specific collection of items that are sacred, not just objects. We will have for example an iPhone belonging to one of the victims. Beyond the banality of the object itself, there is a tragic story to tell, there is a sacred dimension to show. We will probably begin to collect in a few weeks' time. But we need to keep in mind that these are very specific and sensitive objects. So, we have to deal with very different things: history or

sociology as a science, the human and the social experiences, the collective issues and then the sacred dimension of what we're doing.

AG: Museums do root themselves in artifacts, that's what museums do. They are collecting institutions. But museums of history and particularly memorial museums use artifacts in very different ways than an art museum, which will give you typologies of art, and objects, and say this is an icon of such and such, we're looking at it as an exemplar of this person's oeuvre. That is not how we approach objects in a memorial museum. The object is the illustration of the narrative, as opposed to the point of focus. It brings the narrative alive literally through the human connection. I am thinking about the shoes at the Holocaust Museum. You've got 36,000 square feet of exhibition space per floor, and you go through this detailed history. You have got the history, the films, the artifacts, the narrative, the voices. All of this is there. What do people remember when they leave the Holocaust Museum? The shoes. The room with the shoes. They are musty, they smell, they're not pretty, they are gray, they've lost all their color. But it is the visualization of the absence that gets to people. What they've learned up here is actually learned in their hearts. And museums that can make that shift, Henry, in my opinion, that can give you these cerebral, intellectual contents, but that capture you at the level of visceral understanding, emotional understanding, those are the museums that are going to make an impact on people, that they won't forget. Every museum has to be rooted in academic excellence, historical accuracy, knowledge of the facts. That is what we are all about, but the way we deliver that information has to grab you at the emotional level.

Fundamentally, when we began the process of creating the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, a question that we had to ask ourselves over and over and over again, was: Why are we doing this? Is it about remembering? For the sake of memory? Is it simply to save what happened? But to what end? Why remember these people who got caught up in, you know, a horrific moment? Why are we obligated to remember them? And below every decision we made in creating the 9/11 Memorial & Museum was the fundamental understanding that we are remembering so that we, as human beings, can understand the absolute unacceptability of terrorism, of mass violence as a negotiation tool when there are grievances. Humanly speaking, it could have been me in an office building on the 20th floor of a high rise in Lower Manhattan, it could have been me getting on a plane that morning to go to Disneyland, it could have been my husband, my friend, my uncle, my neighbor this happened to, people just like us. And if there's going to be a collective response in reaction to the use of terrorism as a tool, as a political tool, it has to rise up from a sense of purpose that this is unacceptable to us as human beings, that human beings cannot gain anything from negotiating in this way. So first you have to ask yourself why you're doing it. Then everything else and your decisions follow.

MW

and MAA: To build up on what you just said Alice, could we discuss the key issue of who decides? In France, the project came much more from the state, compared to the US where civil society and associations came together first. How would you describe the relationships between these two key players, the state and civil society?

AG:

Immediately after the attacks, there was a political will to create something. We didn't know what it would be, but something that would commemorate the people who were killed and tell the story. Money was actually funneled into Lower Manhattan from the federal government of the United States through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There was an appropriation that went to an entity that was created, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), a city-state agency to redevelop what had been destroyed in Lower Manhattan: the office space, the residential buildings, I mean there was so much to rebuild. And a portion of that money was set aside to create a memorial and museum. The LMDC set about to have a competition for the memorial. There was a man by the name of John Whitehead who was the chair at the time, and John was just one of these great public servants, a great individual. He insisted that there be public comment all the way through the memorial development, in the design competition process.

Alongside the LMDC, there was a lot of engagement of the family members of victims; the LMDC had a family Advisory Council, they had public displays of the final number of submissions for the contest, they were getting public commentary all the way. A separate organization, then called the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation, was formed to oversee the building of the Memorial and the planning for a museum at the site. As with the memorial design process, from the very beginning, the museum planning effort was an inclusive process. So, I think all of Cliff's gray hairs came from this decision [laughs].

In 2006, we asked him to lead what we called the museum planning conversation series. We invited representatives of every constituency we could imagine, who would have a vested interest in what this project would come to be. We had family members of victims, survivors, first response agency representatives, some government representatives, landmark preservationists, architects, Lower Manhattan residents and Lower Manhattan business people. With all of them, we had about 90 people in the room. It was extraordinary. And we set about to have a conversation first about what this project might achieve so that we could develop a common language about what we were envisioning. This process went on for eight years—and it was not easy—but getting feedback from these various, different perspectives all the way along, as we brought design drawings, brought our challenges to them,

helped us think through the creation of the museum. In the end, the decisions fell to us, and there were a lot of choices. You make a decision, and you hope for the best. But these decisions were deeply informed by multiple perspectives.

In those conversations, we learned that you could have multiple, completely contradictory perspectives on an issue that were all legitimate, depending on where you were coming from. But they weren't necessarily compatible, so we had to negotiate that and say what's the story we have to tell, how do we have to tell it, and how does it resonate most effectively with the broad general public, the people who aren't on the inside of the story, but are coming here to pay respects and to learn.

CC: The conversation series was deeply formative for the museum, and I don't think we can over-emphasize how important that was. The previous interactions with these groups had largely been separate. Their perspectives were expressed to whatever the authority was and they were involved with, but they were expressed in a context where alternative views or other perspectives were not right there at the table. And I think the benefit for us, but also the change in the process through the conversation series, was that we brought all of these perspectives together. As Alice said, nobody is really wrong in this circumstance, but you look at it from different perspectives with different priorities and it was very interesting to see what that dynamic was in real time as people were listening to one another and speaking from very authentic perspectives but wanting different outcomes. That was for us a very, very important part of the project.

HR: We are doing now exactly the same. We are meeting a lot of people, in small groups, with a small part of the committee, to discuss the project of the museum. We meet a lot of people, including Muslim authorities, François Hollande, who was the French President at the time of November 13 attacks, a lot of lawyers and magistrates. About one hundred people. And we have exactly the same result, contradictory approaches of what we have to do.

CC: Going back to that 2014 panel: one of the critiques that was made of us was that we didn't take politics enough into account, and we weren't critical enough of the politics of the time. It's amazing how much politics change. Now it has been 20 years since 9/11, so even if we had sort of critiqued the politics of a particular time, that would really, by today, probably be the most outmoded aspect of the museum. But the critique of our so-called political stance, presumably not critical enough of the Bush administration, not critical enough of the Iraq war, of the American Middle East policy and its long history, particularly focused on President Bush's description of the 9/11 attacks as being motivated by a hatred of American freedoms. It was so fundamental, in his view, that this hatred motivated the attacks.

That critique came from France as well, when we talked with the CNRS scholars and others. We were criticized for this so-called lack of political perspective on the time, or for an American tendency towards glorifying our own values. And yet, most recently, the President of France, under whose authority the Paris museum-memorial is being planned, spoke of these recent attacks as targeting the fundamental values of French society itself. Which rings very familiar to us in relation to those original George Bush statements about what motivated the 9/11 attacks. There seems to be a relatively widespread belief in France, which the President articulated, that these Islamist-inspired attacks were an assault on something elemental about French society.

MAA: Were there, for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, any considerations about how to possibly fight mass violence and get rid of it in the future? And all these notions, articulating cognitive, emotional, political considerations: was it a will from you, was it from the people who founded this memorial, something that you wanted from the beginning?

AG: I would have to say that the process of creating the museum and the memorial was iterative. You come in with a certain set of understandings, you come in with the preliminary design and then it changes as you go through the process. So, while I would say our sense of purpose remained fairly constant, the way it became expressed would change over time by some practical constraints and by recognition that the story we were telling had to emphasize certain areas more than others. It was an evolving kind of experience. I am not—and I know this is very popular in museums right now—I am not a proponent of a call to action in a museum experience. That you go through the museum and at the very end the visitor is given a single directive such as: now that you've seen this, now that you know this, now that you're a witness to this horrible aspect of human nature, what are you going to do about it? I don't think that's what museums do. It's not transactional in that way.

I believe museum experiences are encounters with authenticity—and, in this case, the authenticity of both the worst of human nature and the response that demonstrates the best of who we are. It's a way of asking visitors both to empathize with the people who were caught up in this horrible thing but also to ask themselves in a self-reflective way: could I do that, could I respond selflessly to save people in a burning building, could I run down to a burning pile of steel to see if I could save people, even if I had no talent at that, what is it in me that would be the reaction in favor of humanity, do I have that capacity for compassion? I think that by tapping into our potential for compassion and empathy, that is how you ultimately move the needle a little bit in terms of violence in the world. You've got to get people to see themselves in the story in both good and bad ways, because these were not monsters,

those who took down those two buildings and crashed into the Pentagon. They were people acting out of a will to do something that they believed was righteous. We need to say what was missing in those people, that they didn't recognize the human impact of their actions and the fundamental evil of their actions.

Understanding our human capacity for both absolute evil and extraordinary goodness is I think the purpose of memorial museums. That is what the best Holocaust museums ask you to think about. If they say: now go out and sign a petition about how terrorism is bad . . . that doesn't mean anything, right? It has to be about you, the individual, recognizing your capacity for action and the collective value of it. If enough people feel that way, maybe that will move the needle a little bit.

HR: I completely agree with this idea of authenticity. The main thing I remember from my first visit to New York memorial are the text messages sent by people in the planes on their phone. When I think about that I simply stop thinking about history and why it happened, even though I am a scholar, and I will be a scholar forever.

One thing we try to build at the museum is something in between emotion and distance. Why? Not just because we need distance, but because one of the major claims, especially by the victims and the associations we are dealing with, is the need for a meaning of what happened, especially for the most recent events. Of course, if you deal with the history of terrorism in the 1960s and the 1970s or even later, there are a lot of explanations—geopolitics, the situation in the Middle East, the extreme right, etc. But what's going on now, even if we can have a sort of explanation, is very difficult to accept. Most people don't understand what is going on, and not only in France. I'm absolutely convinced that we're caught in the middle of a global phenomenon, where France is among the targets. That's why we are building something between emotion and distance, to try to provide visitors with a meaning. But we don't have the answer! The meaning is not just: this happened because point 1, and 2, and 3. The idea is to explain, to give a historical background, to offer some elements for the visitors so that they can find out *for themselves* what the meaning of what happened could be.

One of our discussions at the moment is about the *parcours*, the itinerary of the exhibit, the way we will build the permanent exhibition. We don't know if it will be a line or a circle. With a line, you have a point of departure and an exit at the end. With a circle, you let the visitor choose whatever he or she wants to see in a very specific space. And the more we're advancing, the more I will distance myself from any directive approach. I want the visitor to be a little bit free.

AG: We came to the same conclusion, except in the telling of the story of the day, which is very chronological, but the way you go through the museum is up to you, as a visitor.

HR: One of the main points of the exhibition and of the whole project is that it won't be only on terrorism. We want to deal with other issues, at least, two or three other issues. First, the reaction of societies, especially the French society, of course—what you did in your museum—and the question of victims and memory as a whole. We want for example to put in this museum why we are living in societies that grant so much importance to the question of memory. What is memory? I don't know and I've been working on that for forty years!

The only thing I know is that the visitors will include not only young people living in Paris but also young citizens from abroad. And the only reason why we're building a museum like that is because it happened, and we don't want to forget. Most of my French friends completely forgot what happened 20 years ago. When I began to work on this issue, even I had completely forgotten what took place in my own area out of November 13. For example, there was an attack in 1995 in the market where I was going every week.³ I simply forgot this event because terrorism in the last five, six years was not part of everyday life. Now it is, and not only in France.

Now, coming back to Cliff's counter-argument or counter-criticism. Back in the days of your very own burgeoning memorial project, if I had a criticism, it was not about the fact that the museum wasn't speaking about the Iraq War, which is another problem. I had a very traditional reaction as an historian who needs some background to explain what happened before 9/11. That was my main position. It's not that original and now I have changed a little bit my mind, even if I'm still convinced that there is a problem. In such museums, we have to find balanced narratives to talk about politics, we need to let some questions rather open (like the definition itself of terrorism). And yet I'm still convinced that we have to grasp controversial historical issues, no matter how uneasy this is.

Let me give you another example: the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. I went there and I was absolutely astonished by this place, the monument, the museum, and I met Kari Watkins [the executive director]. I remember a discussion we had about a very traditional room in the [permanent] exhibition where they explain where the murderer came from, from a small supremacist group. I knew the story and I asked to Kari. Is it enough? You don't explain the background of this guy. You don't explain that it precisely took place in Oklahoma, and not, for example, New York. She said to me that this political issue was very difficult for her to put on the agenda. I don't criticize her. I don't know what I would have done in the same situation.

What's going on in France is exactly the contrary. Even if I want to avoid politics, I can't. If I want to follow, say, just the question of emotion, the human experience, without some explanation, I won't be able to do it. Not because I have any pressure. I don't have any pressure of any kind. Our Commission is free to do whatever we want to do.

MW

and MAA: Can you expand a little further on this? About the connections between the French memorial and museum project, French history, and the role of the past in our ways of treating violence, representing it and memorizing it.

HR:

For us, it came down to a very concrete question: How far should we go back in French history? Terrorism in French history began, let's say, in the 19th century with the anarchists, like elsewhere, not just in France. What about the Algerian war, when terrorism was a very important issue and which is still a very vivid one for the Algerian and French societies? A very famous historian, my friend Benjamin Stora, who has been working extensively on the history of the Algerian war, still receives threats from the extreme right, from the OAS.⁴ There are still people believing that Algeria should be French. The way we dealt with France's past and present within our project was, first, to ask these questions to many people: What should we cover? How far should we go back? And according to the majority of the answers, we had to include the history of Algeria, as it represented a huge experience of terrorism in people's mind. We had to talk about the FLN for instance.⁵ But François Hollande said exactly the contrary, that we shouldn't consider Algeria war, only to make the general purpose more confused.

So, and this is a frank answer to Cliff, what I discovered in the last two, three months, is how far our project of museum is deeply rooted in contemporary political issues. After having consulted about a hundred people, it is clear we have to deal with the question of what is the French Republic, in the French sense today, what is *laïcité*,⁶ what is the place of religion in today's society in general, and of Islam in particular. All these questions which appear every day in the newspapers and in the media are part of the project. Even if we did not want it, it is already political.

CC:

I don't think we need to really go off on the full tangent on this. And I'm not sure we disagree as much as you might think because, obviously, if we are talking about these things in the context of this discussion, yes politics comes up. But I think it's something else, and something more in fact than politics, that is fundamental in terms of beliefs, in terms of emotions. What linked what the Americans experienced with 9/11 and what the French experienced with these terrorist attacks, is being a society under siege. And there are

political explanations for that. But the feeling and impact within the society is very different from politics; and the museums that are created as artifacts of these societies are not museums that are fundamentally concerned with politics. Politics may have a place in the discussions about them, in how these museums are shaped, in the decisions that are made. But what these museums express is something deeper about the society's response to what was done to it; about the ability of the society to mobilize a response to what was done, that response being a collective one. And that collective response overwhelms to a certain degree political differences.

Around 9/11, we had what we refer to as the 9/12 effect: we had the horrors of the attacks and then we had this unified response, literally the next day, that brought Americans together from very, very different political perspectives, from around the country, where in that era New York was kind of the outlier and a very different place compared to everything else. And that I believe is a fundamental element of these museums. It's not that we're all political actors or have political views in the context of making these museums. It's that politics is not enough in creating, you know, this deeply meaningful experience that Alice was describing.

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Notes

1. A preparatory commission for a memorial museum around terrorism, called for by Emmanuel Macron, the French President, and presided over by Henry Rousso.
2. Henry Rousso refers here to the former waves of contemporary terrorism in France and at a global stage, which will be presented in the museum: nationalist (i.e. Palestinian movements), anti-imperialist (i.e. Red Army Faction), from the far-right, regionalist (Corsica and Basque country), and Islamism.
3. The 1995 France bombings were a series of attacks carried out by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria.
4. The Secret Armed Organization (OAS) was a right-wing French dissident paramilitary organization during the Algerian war. Against Algeria's independence, they perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks.
5. The National Liberation Front (FLN) was the principal revolutionary body that directed the Algerian war of independence against France. Today, the FLN is the main political party in Algeria.
6. France's specific conception of secularism.

Author biographies

Alice M. Greenwald, a graduate in history of religions from the University of Chicago Divinity School, has served as President and CEO of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum since 2017. From 2006 to 2016, she served as Executive Vice President for Exhibitions, Collections, and Education, and was the founding director of the Museum. She was previously Associate Director for Museum Programs at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC from 2001 to 2006, having served for 14 years as an expert advisor to this project.

Clifford Chanin is Executive Vice President and Deputy Director for Museum Programs for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. He is in charge of the content of exhibitions and programs intended for the general public. In addition to having been for 10 years as Associate Director of Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, where he was responsible for the implementation of cultural programs in the Muslim world, he also founded the Legacy Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting the long-term effects of conflict in different societies around the world. He is also a member of the *mission de préfiguration* for the forthcoming French memorial museum in memory of the victims of terrorism.

Henry Rousso is a French historian, Director of research at the CNRS, and specialist of the Vichy France. A member and founder of the Institute of the History of Present Time, at CNRS, he has also been a visiting professor at Harvard University, New York University, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yale University, Columbia University, and so on. He has held and still hold many positions as a scientific advisor of important museums such as the Shoah Memorial, the Peace Memorial in Caen, the WWII Museum in Danzig as well as the Buchenwald Memorial. He was entrusted, following the recommendations issued by the Memorial Committee set up by the French Minister of Justice and in accordance with a presidential commitment, the presidency of a mission of pre-figuration composed of 16 personalities who submitted on 20 March 2020 a report outlining the future contours of a French memorial museum in memory of the victims of terrorism.

Michel Wieviorka is a sociologist. He conducted research on social movements, racism, antisemitism, and violence and terrorism. He was the president of the International Sociological Association (2006–2010), a member of the Scientific Council of the European Research Council, and directed the Center of Sociological Analysis and Intervention (CADIS) at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, where he is a professor. He was also the head of Foundation Maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH) from 2009 to 2019. In English, he published, among others, *The Making of Terrorism* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), *Violence: A New Approach* (SAGE, 2009), and *Evil* (Polity Press, 2012). He has been elected the president of the Scientific Council of the forthcoming museum and memorial for terrorism victims in France.

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui is a researcher and lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a lecturer at Sciences Po Paris, having previously been a research professor at Georgetown University. A political scientist and historian of international relations, his main fields of research are the history and sociology of Salafism and jihadism, the history of US foreign policy, and contemporary international relations. He is the author of *Salafism Goes Global* (2020, Oxford University Press) and *Comprendre le salafisme* (2020, L'Harmattan), and the editor of the volume *The Foreign Policy of Islamist Political Parties* (2018, Edinburgh University Press).