

Concorde—its history and tragedy

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28 July 2000

Tuesday's crash of an Air France Concorde outside Paris seized the attention of people all over the world. Anyone who viewed the broadcast images of the tragedy could not but help feel horrified and saddened, first and foremost at the thought of the passengers' terrible fate, but also by the impact of such an event on the living—the stricken human beings, workmen and local residents standing near the smoking wreckage in Gonesse. It was a chastening and sobering sight.

The way Concorde has been thrust onto television screens and into the headlines—under such dreadful circumstances—impels one to consider the conditions under which the airplane came into being, and how much the world has changed since then. At least some of the shock and horror that accompanied the July 25 crash is bound up with the origins of the jet and its place in history.

The emergence of supersonic air travel as a serious possibility dates to the late 1950s and early 1960s, and seems to parallel the development of the American and Soviet space programs. British designer Sir Archibald Cox, according to the *Washington Post*, “wrote down his preliminary Concorde specifications on a scrap of paper in 1959,” two years after the launching of the USSR's Sputnik I and a year after the establishment of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) by the US government.

The US, France and Britain were all originally interested in the development of supersonic flight, but the costs of the project obliged British Aerospace and France's Aerospatiale to join forces in 1961. Boeing, the giant aircraft builder, began research, with government help, on an American supersonic transport (SST) at that same time. The US project seems never to have been forcefully pursued. The media ascribe its eventual demise to environmental and other kinds of opposition. While these may have been factors, it is difficult to believe they would not have been overcome had the government and the corporate sector seen the SST as profitable and commercially viable.

The British and French governments, with their greater ability or willingness to offer state support to the aircraft industry, did pursue Concorde [Harmony], as it became known. The two powers had a considerable stake in demonstrating that while the US and the Soviet Union could fire men into space, they at least could hurtle human beings around the globe faster than anyone else. The Concorde made its first test flight in March 1969, only four months before the first man, an American, walked on

the moon. (The USSR canceled its own supersonic flight program after its TU-144 crashed at the Paris Air Show at Le Bourget airport in 1973.)

While the space race and the effort to develop a supersonic commercial jet were obviously bound up with the Cold War and European-American and other political and economic rivalries, there was more to these achievements than that. It was widely felt at the time that these astonishing accomplishments, raising human beings to heights and speeds hitherto unimaginable, would somehow contribute to the human condition, that they would inevitably bring progress, however vaguely envisioned, in their wake. The period generated all sorts of futuristic visions—including space commuters shuttling to the moon, as people currently did from one city to another. This optimism now seems almost quaint.

By the time of the Concorde's first commercial flight, in January 1976, the world had already undergone a considerable change. The American supersonic project had fallen by the wayside (its federal subsidies cut off by Congress in March, 1971), along with the Project Apollo moon program (following the Apollo 17 mission in December, 1972)—victims of a budget crisis exacerbated by the Vietnam War. The quadrupling of oil prices in 1973-74 had an impact as well on the future of an aircraft that burned vast quantities of fuel.

The mood in the US had changed. The earlier hopefulness had given way in large measure to popular disillusionment and even cynicism, nourished by the Nixon presidency and its denouement in scandal and resignation.

Although British Airways and Air France have maintained their Concorde flights for nearly a quarter of a century, the airplane has a peculiar “lame-duck” aura about it. The twelve remaining Concorde's are the only supersonic commercial jets in existence. No Concorde's have been produced since 1980, and a few of the planes are held in reserve and cannibalized to provide replacement parts for those that fly.

A year ago, Boeing and NASA stopped development of a new type of “hypersonic transport.” Boeing wanted to build a larger plane, one that carried as many as 300 people, to render flights more profitable. But making the craft larger conflicted with the effort to make it lighter and more fuel-efficient. A new design, according to experts, would cost around 10 billion dollars to develop, an amount requiring global financing, highly unlikely under present circumstances. At this point there is no

supersonic plane under development anywhere in the world.

The French and British kept flying the Concorde not only because the flights made money. It had come to be accepted as a symbol of British and, perhaps even more strongly, French national pride. As one press account noted: “In France, the disaster of flight F-4590 was more than the crash of an aircraft. It was the end of a symbol. Concorde was conceived in France. Its first test-flight from Toulouse on 2 March 1969 came in the dying days of the government of General de Gaulle, and seemed to represent the country's re-launch into a modern, technological future. Test-pilot André Turcat became a national hero.” French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing made history during the 1970s by flying on a Concorde, with considerable fanfare, to Guinea, one of the country's former African colonies.

However, the efforts to keep the Concorde or the “supersonic idea” alive today seem futile. The technology, so to speak, withered on the vine, and the jet never truly emerged as much more than a symbol of luxury. As it turned out, billions of dollars in public funding—which the British and French governments will never recoup—have gone to provide air travel for a relatively small number of people. As remarkable an aircraft, and as imposing a human achievement, as the Concorde is, the plane has proved to have little meaningful impact on people's lives. Rather, in its own way, the Concorde has become yet another reminder of the social chasm dividing the moneyed elite from everyone else.

One might say that although the Concorde has remained in service for the past two decades, it long ago lost its purpose. The technology—requiring international cooperation on research and development to sustain it—and the social ethos never came together. They diverged more and more with the passage of time, as state intervention in the economy was scaled back and the immediate whims of the market became the new idol to be worshipped. The Concorde survived, but as an artifact. Anyone excluded from the charmed circle of those who frequently flew the airplane—executives, jet-setters, film stars and the like—could be forgiven for not knowing it was still in operation.

And now this tragedy—a horrible, all too visible event. The terrible images of an airplane consumed in flames! Made more sad and poignant by the fact that most of the victims were taking the “trip of their lives.” Some were wealthy, but there were also, for example, two retired postal employees, husband and wife, who had saved for years. Traveling on a charter flight—a method of filling the planes that Air France and British Airways have increasingly turned to—the ill-fated Concorde passengers were reportedly paying less than half the regular fare.

One is drawn to the televised images. The cynics will say: another proof that we are all voyeurs! It goes without saying that the media will appeal to the worst instincts, but the impact of the tragedy cannot be primarily attributed to the baser motives. People are genuinely saddened by lives cut short and

families devastated.

An Associated Press reporter interviewed a bystander: “Jean-Claude Ramathon raced to a small hotel in a wheat field to help frantic guests trapped in the flaming rubble of an Air France Concorde. Telling his story hours later, his hands still trembled. ‘We ran up and got up to two meters away from the hotel but had to stop because of the smoke,’ Ramathon said Tuesday. He is 39, a workman in blue overalls, but he said little about himself before hurrying away.”

Residents of Gonesse spoke too of the pilot, who they are convinced steered the plane away from the center of the town, perhaps saving hundreds of lives. “The pilot knew what was going on. He was a pilot who saved the lives of the people of Gonesse,” said the manager of a Shell station, Madame Turpin.

The tragedy brings out the best in people. For an instant, human beings act like human beings, not economic units. There is a sense of solidarity with the doomed passengers; many of us also fly. There is a common grief, a sentiment that rarely finds widespread expression. This is a moment when empathy finds an outlet.

Life returns to normal for the rest of us, and the images fade. Airplanes roar overhead and no one thinks twice about it. How can that empathy for others, which for a moment found an outlet, become a more common feature of daily life? We need to remind ourselves that no less terrible than the deaths of these 113 people is the fate of thousands each day who die, not only in accidents resulting from appalling social conditions—in India, the Philippines, Indonesia—but from preventable conditions like starvation, disease, war and the eruption of butchery.

There is a need for elementary empathy and concern for others to be widened, and elevated by a scientific insight into the underlying causes of so much of humanity's distress. That would represent a true leap in consciousness. Is that too much to hope for?



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