The social and political context of the Germanwings disaster

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The crash of Germanwings Flight 9525 in France, which sent 150 people to their deaths, was, according to investigators, the result of the deliberate actions of the co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz.

Following an evaluation of evidence from the voice recorder, specialists from the French Civil Aviation Authority (BEA) and the Marseille public prosecutor, Brice Robin, have come to the conclusion that after the pilot left the cockpit, the 27-year-old co-pilot manually reset the Airbus A320's autopilot to take the plane from 38,000 feet to 96 feet, the lowest possible setting. Lubitz then refused to allow the pilot back into the cockpit and quietly remained at the controls until the plane crashed into the side of a mountain.

Investigators say this could not have been an accident. From the quiet breathing of the co-pilot, who can be heard on the recording, they conclude that he was fully conscious until the impact.

No sooner had this highly troubling analysis been made known than the media, assorted politicians and the Lufthansa management sought to present the disaster as an incomprehensible event without deeper social significance.

The crash was a tragic fluke that the best security procedures and psychological safeguards could not have prevented, said Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr. In his "worst nightmare" he could "not have imagined that such a thing could happen one day."

On the web site of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, editor Mathias Müller von Blumencron wrote, "This accident has to be explained, as that is the only way we can come to terms with it." But he sought the explanation exclusively in the individual psyche of the culprit, declaring: "At the heart of the explanation is one person, more precisely, his head, his possibly misguided brain… It is the psyche of Andreas Lubitz

that caused the incomprehensible. On the basis of the present state of things, the solution can be found only in the person of the co-pilot."

Really?

Of course, one has to establish what motives, personal issues or psychological problems drove Lubitz to do this terrible deed. But the psychological background alone cannot explain a disaster of this magnitude. Lubitz acted within a particular social environment. To understand his actions, one must understand not only his individual malady, but also the society in which he lived.

What immense social pressures are required to drive a young man—described by all of his acquaintances as unobtrusive, quiet, pleasant and easy to deal with—to murder 149 people? Why had no one seen the warning signs of the coming disaster?

To probe these questions inevitably necessitates going beyond the "possibly misguided brain" of the culprit and considering a social context that is characterized by increasing occupational stress, economic insecurity, public anxiety, social tensions, state violence and militarism.

The Düsseldorf Public Prosecutor's Office raided Lubitz's apartments in Montabaur and in Düsseldorf but found neither a letter of confession nor evidence of a political or religious motive. But they discovered evidence of possible mental distress. They found a torn doctor's note recommending time off from work, including the day of the crash, and concluded that "the deceased had concealed his illness from his employer and professional colleagues."

Why did Lubitz go to work despite having a sick note? Did he fear losing his job, which was apparently his dream job? He had joined the local glider club as a 15-year-old and was trained by Lufthansa as a pilot

after leaving high school in Bremen. However, he interrupted his training for six months due, according to unconfirmed reports, to depression.

Was Lubitz unable to cope with the increasing work pressure, which is constantly growing, especially at Lufthansa and its low-cost subsidiary Germanwings? This issue has been the source of a year-long industrial dispute by pilots.

Work-related stress and associated mental disorders have increased tremendously, not only in the aviation industry, but throughout society. According to a study by the World Health Organization, 5 percent of the German population of working age, or 3.1 million people, suffer from a major depressive illness. The number of days of sick leave due to mental illness has increased in recent years—18-fold, according to health insurance companies. In 2012 alone it increased by 10 percent.

Lubitz must have felt himself under enormous pressure to commit such a monstrous act. Even experienced psychologists cannot recall a similarly extreme case.

While there is the phenomenon of extended suicide, where a suicide victim kills others in addition to himself, the other victims are usually relatives or people with whom the perpetrator has a personal relationship. Lubitz's actions can only partially be compared to killing sprees such as the Columbine High School massacre in America or the bloodletting at Erfurt Gutenberg Gymnasium in Germany.

In such events, the victims usually come from the perpetrator's social milieu and are targeted because of some perceived offence. In the Germanwings disaster, however, 149 people whom Lubitz in all probability did not know were randomly sent to their deaths simply because they happened to be aboard the airplane.

One would expect that even a mentally ill and depressed person would have inhibitions against committing such a massacre. That these were apparently not present should be seen against the backdrop of a general devaluing of human life.

Andreas Lubitz was 11 years old when the Bundeswehr went into Yugoslavia in the first foreign operation of the post-World War II German military. Thereafter, he lived through one war after another in which American and German troops killed thousands and officials publicly boasted of the number of alleged terrorists "taken out."

In the Mediterranean, thousands of refugees drown each year while the European Union erects new barriers to prevent them from reaching the continent. The austerity cuts demanded by the German government push millions into poverty in Greece and drive unknown numbers of people to suicide.

The explanation for the Germanwings disaster cannot be found simply in the mind and psyche of Andreas Lubitz. Rather, one must place his sickness within its real context—that of a dysfunctional and diseased social order.

At the same time, the wave of sympathy, human solidarity and eagerness to help with which the population reacted in the crash area, throughout France and in the home countries of the victims brought something different to light—a deep yearning for a truly humane society.

The politicians who commemorate the victims will not fulfil this need. They return from the memorial ceremonies to pursue their policies of welfare cuts, labour market "reforms," ever expanding police powers at home and increasingly bloody wars abroad.

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