





"There is a serious danger that fire policy will be developed on the basis of work c

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'Cool Guys Who Are Good Guys'¹: Cultural Representations of Firefighters as Heroes
by Viktoria Sargent

After the attacks, 'the stairwells were filled not only with citizens on their way down, but fire fighters on their way up... When they decided to go into that building, that was the most heroic moment. The fire department wasn't defeated that day, it won when fire fighters ran into that second building...knowing that building number one had collapsed.

¹ Trademark phrase of FisherPrice Rescue Heroes characters. See page 10.

Considering what the extreme requirements of firefighting can entail (entering dangerous situations, extinguishing fires and rescuing trapped people), it seems far from surprising that the label 'hero' is often applied to firefighters. For example, the firefighters involved in the events, and the aftermath, of the September 11th terrorist attacks in America have been branded 'New York's Bravest' and 'Heroes' across much of the media. Arguably, however, they were just 'doing their job'. This project aims to explore the way in which firefighting is portrayed as heroic in a variety of cultural representations. It is not the aim of the project to discuss the consequences of the representations *per se*, rather it is to examine concepts such as masculinity, professionalism and emotional work that could be seen as contributing to a public discourse that views firefighting as heroic. Whilst these issues are separated for ease of discussion, it should be acknowledged that they are all interlinked, so discussions of one topic area will necessarily include elements of the others.

Firefighting as a 'Professional-Vocation'

It first seems suitable to consider what firefighters can be seen to 'be' in terms of their work, in order to establish if there are any elements of the job that could advance the perception that their work is heroic.

Arguably, firefighting contains elements of what could conventionally be described as a 'profession', although this is not necessarily a term which is regularly used in describing the occupation.

Hughes suggests that:

A profession delivers esoteric services – advice or action or both – to individuals...to whole classes or groups of people or to the public at large.

(1971: 374).

Furthermore, an integral part of being considered a 'professional' is that a certain trust is afforded to you. Ideas about the necessity of trust can be linked to Giddens' ideas that we trust certain people ('Professionals – lawyers, doctors and so forth') because we have to; because we do not have the 'expert knowledge' of these professionals to solve certain problems ourselves (Giddens, 1990: 27). We (the public), in the interest of what Giddens calls 'ontological security', *have* to trust that when there is a fire, firefighters will come and put it out. This places firefighters in a position where they are in some sense *needed*

by society. This can be seen clearly when firefighters strike, or threaten to strike. It is not unusual for media to express surprise, or even outrage, that firefighters could want to strike (regardless of the reason), and there is often concern that the army, who often step in as reserve firefighters, will not be able to cope. The only people to be trusted to do the job are the (paid) professional firefighters.

Despite this affinity with the idea of 'professionalism', it could also be argued that firefighting displays elements of a 'vocation'; 'a person's employment, especially regarded as requiring dedication' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1996: 1166). Baigent points out that of the 33,499 firefighters employed in England and Wales in the year 2000, only 105 left to take up other employment; 'for the majority of the workforce...there is clearly something about being a firefighter that holds them in the fire service' (Baigent, 2001a). It therefore seems that a large amount of dedication to the job exists in the fire service. In a documentary devoted to the firefighters involved in the September 11th, one American firefighter suggested that 'no-one else on earth can understand what firefighters do, except firefighters' (Heroes of Ground Zero, 08.11.01, Channel Four).

Goldman (1991) examines the way in which both Max Weber and Thomas Mann apply the concept of 'a calling' to a secular society in order to describe devotion to work without religious connotations:

The calling...is a magical device for creating in the person a sense of...purpose, of significance and personal value, through the devotion to ideals... The calling...serves the need of self-definition, self-justification, and identity through devotion to a higher ideal through service.

(Goldman, 1991: 109-110).

This resonates with a newspaper article covering firefighters tackling a plane crash in Queens, Brooklyn, many of whom had been at 'Ground Zero' (the site of the collapsed World Trade Center). This quoted an onlooker as saying:

They hit the fire with aggression and total disregard for their own safety. It is almost a mission.

(Gordon, 2001: 20).

Moreover, U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner is attributed with suggesting that:

The firemen are truly our greatest heroes...they plunge into this sort of hell without question and never stop until the flames are out.

(*Ibid.*)

With such notions that firefighters often go beyond 'the call of duty' and respond to situations seemingly no matter how dangerous it is for them to do so, there appears to be an echoing of the idea that firefighters do have a 'devotion to ideals' of a kind that Weber and Mann discussed. Therefore, it seems that there are elements of a calling/vocation in the fire service, and at the same time, the trust afforded to them by the public gives them a privileged status and position within society. Thus it could be argued that firefighting could be described as a 'professional-vocation', where firefighters are necessarily trusted, but perhaps unlike some other professions, it appears that the money alone is not the only reward for the job. For the onlooker, it is the desire and satisfaction to help others that seems to be the reason for firefighters devotion to their jobs.

The Fireman: Immaculate Manhood?

One important issue in relation to the topic of masculinity is the questioning of the constructed nature of the concept (see Butler, 1994). However, it is too much of an involved discussion to embark on in a project where the focus is the 'representations' of firefighters. At the same time it seemed necessary to acknowledge that such debates exist, and that these could arguably influence my suggestions about the representations.

In England and Wales, only 0.8% (285 of 33,499 fire fighters) are female (figures from Baigent 2001a). This perhaps implies that there is something inherently male (and therefore masculine) associated with firefighting. It could also be implied that firefighting appeals more to men than women as a career. This could be seen as either cause or effect. Perhaps the image of a masculine career sustains an ideology which deters women from entering the fire service, or the career simply does not appeal to women, which creates the imagery that firefighting is a masculine job.

Cooper examines the history of the fire service and its relationship to masculinity in an article significantly entitled The Fireman: Immaculate Manhood.

Given the significance and value of the fireman's task it is little wonder that he should become the embodiment of noble manhood and a celebrated icon of popular culture. (1995: 146).

Cooper considers the way masculinity was perceived to be in crisis in the nineteenth century, and how firemen embodied many of the things that were viewed as 'correct' aspects of manhood by Victorian values. These included

chivalry, heroism, strength, fitness, virility, and a readiness to sacrifice your life for others.

Cooper also examines press debates about women attempting to form their own fire service. The New York Times expressed the opinion that women were 'invading what was perceived as a male sphere' (quoted in Cooper, 1995: 149). It was *firemen*, therefore, that encapsulated the idea of the 'masculine', and the occupation of firefighting became inextricably linked to the idea of 'the masculine' in public discourse.

The *fireman* as a masculine icon in popular culture arguably still exists today. The clichéd phallic image of the fireman and his hose has existed since the nineteenth century (see figure 1), and still exists today often in mass produced calendars and posters.



Figure 1: Lindsay Sandbourne, untitled print of a fireman, 1896, Guildhall Art Gallery, London.
Source: Cooper 1995.

The suggestion of the hose as an extension of the penis is obviously somewhat problematic for application to women in the fire service. Thus it could be considered that a much-used stereotypical image of firefighters encapsulates something that can only apply to men. The images are open to interpretation, but there is arguably little about a phallic symbol to suggest anything other than masculinity.



Figure 2: American Firefighter Removes Body of Baby from Terrorist Attack Site.
Source: America Media Inc., 2001: 77.

Figure 2, when compared to figure 3, could also be argued to represent a fireman as masculine in a different way. Figure 3 was published in 1986 by the Athena Group, and is considered to depict the 'new masculinity/men' as caring and sensitive, as opposed to the male who was 'estranged from his emotions' as the previous stereotype of masculinity suggested (see Nixon, 1997: 296-297).



Figure 3: Man and Baby. Image produced by The Athena Group, 1986.
Source: Nixon, 1997.

Figure 2 bears a striking resemblance to the photograph that was supposed to encapsulate the essence of 'new masculinity', and thus the same assumptions about the representation of a caring, but still very much 'masculine', male, could be made. What this does raise however, is the potential problem of authenticity of representations; obviously a fireman carrying a dead baby out of a bombsite is a stirring image, but the nature of the image is potentially problematic. Would I have chosen his image as a representation of a firefighter as masculine had I not seen the Athena picture? And was the intention of the chosen photograph to evoke the idea of masculinity, or was this just my interpretation?

Firefighting as Emotional Work



Figure 4: 'Firemen remove the body of Department Chaplain Mychal Judge, who was killed while administering last rites'.

Source: Newsweek, 2001: 6-7. Photo by Shannon Stapleton - Reuters.

The concept of 'emotional labor' originates with Hochschild:

To mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display.

(1983: 7)

This idea of emotional labour/work is often discussed with reference to those working in the service sector where one emotion may be felt whilst another is outwardly expressed. Similarly, firefighters may have to face distressing and dangerous situations, whilst maintaining their 'professional ethos' (Baigent, 2001a). Thus emotional work is partly about the concealment of certain emotions, or at least the management of emotions, in the public arena. The act of firefighting is done almost entirely in the public eye. Baigent (2001b) argues that it is the watching public who actually give firefighters their heroic image. This was particularly the case at the World Trade Center where world media attention was concentrated on the firefighters involved.



Figure 5: Caption reads: 'Weary from physical and emotional exhaustion, one of New York's Bravest kneels in sorrow at the site of one of the collapsed World Trade Center towers'. Source: America Media Inc., 2001: 86

Both figures 4 and 5 were taken in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center and help to show just how much the firefighters involved were in the public eye. What they also both show however, seems to be quite unusual; firefighters, moreover firemen, in obvious emotional stress. Moreover, this was seemingly unquestioned by the public, given the nature of what the firefighters were having to do: search for and remove bodies (including many colleagues) from a dangerous situation. Hearn (1993: 143) discusses the way in which men have been constructed as 'unemotional', and that is therefore seen as uncommon for them to show emotion, particularly in a work place. He goes on to say that it becomes slightly more acceptable, or perhaps less unexpected, for emotions to be shown in moments of (relative) high drama (*ibid.*: 145).

Figures 4 and 5 perhaps actualise the point Hearn is trying to make. We do not generally expect to see firefighters showing emotion, at least not publicly; and it was almost the magnitude of the situation that made such a display acceptable. The images were used in magazines apparently to show the enormity of the situation - almost as if they are suggesting that things must have been bad if firefighters were not ashamed to be seen as upset.

This can be viewed as part of the heroic side of firefighters, given that it is rare for firefighters to be showing emotion whilst they face disturbing situations involving death and danger. Perhaps it is slightly ironic though, that if firefighters often cried publicly they would not be seen as suitable for the job, but when they are seen as reacting in such a way to a big disaster, this exemplifies further in the public eye, the heroic nature of their job.

TOYS AND TRIBUTES

Finally I have chosen to briefly examine some representations of firefighters which seem to have some points of interest for this project. I have first considered the representation of firefighters in children's toys.

Figure 6 shows an example of the kind of set that is widely (and cheaply) available:



Figure 6: 'Fire Rescue Hero' playset. Made by Ackerman Group PLC.

This particular figure is based on an American firefighter, coming with a range of accessories, including a fire department badge. There is also the 'Rescue Heroes' group of toys and cartoons produced by Fisher Price and Mattel, Inc.



Figure 7: 'Wendy Waters' character from 'Rescue Heroes'. Made by FisherPrice.



Figure 8: 'Sam Sparks' character from 'Rescue Heroes'. Made by FisherPrice.

Figures 7 and 8 are pictures of two of the characters from the series. It seems refreshing to find that one of the firefighters is a female (Wendy Waters), yet at the same time both characters have broad shoulders and big muscles; very stereotypical 'masculine' traits.

The 'Rescue Heroes' is also a cartoon, the storylines of which formulaically entail a big disaster and a dramatic rescue, with safety messages along the way; for example, if you are ever caught in an electrical storm, you must never stand under a tree! The Rescue Heroes motto is 'Think like a Rescue Hero. Think safe'. The fact that the toys are called Rescue Heroes is perhaps an indication of their intended image, and it is interesting that such a concept was deemed suitable for, and presumably marketable to, children. The set may also appeal to parents; the cartoons encourage safety, and they also place people with 'ordinary jobs' in the position of hero. This is an idea which children can transfer to reality, thus 'Wendy Waters' and 'Sam Sparks' can be seen to perpetuate the idea that firefighters are heroes.



Figure 9: Firefighters raise an American flag at the site of the collapsed World Trade Center ('Ground Zero').

Source: Newsweek 2001: Inside Front Cover. Photo by Ricky Flores - Journal News.

Both Cooper (1995) and Nixon (1997) suggest that the views of 'masculinity' (which were discussed with application firefighters earlier) came from middle-class ideology of what being 'masculine' was about. Cooper goes on to say that because of the honourable nature of the work of a firefighter, this notion of masculinity could be applied to firefighters who were for the most part 'working-class'. What they were doing for their country in terms of fighting a common enemy and helping to maintain gender and racial relations made them an acceptable part of this 'moralized manliness' (1995: 147-155). This may be seen to have relevance to figures 9 and 10. Figure 9 (subsequently immortalised in statue form), an arguably spontaneous act by firefighters at Ground Zero, bears obvious resemblance to figure 10, an image of (American) marines in World War II that became a 'potent symbol of the American war effort' (Baigent 2001c). This defiant act in the face of a seemingly indestructible enemy by the marines, and the firefighters, was a symbol that America would not be beaten. This returns us to the issue of authenticity in photojournalism, and the images of the firefighters here. Orvell (1995: 90) suggests that 'photographers can heroize, just as they can demonize their subjects', whilst Stallabrass (1997: 133) suggests that as 'photojournalism had its roots in radical political and cultural movements', it is a 'suspect practice'. For example, there has been some discussion of how spontaneous the firefighters were, given the existence of the original image.



Figure 10: Marines raise an American flag at Iwo Jima, during the Second World War.
Source: Aimster Fileshare Network, 2001.

Even if this was a 'simulation' of the original picture (just like figure 2 may have been of figure 3), then surely the sentiments of the original image were also intended to be evoked. Returning to Cooper and Nixon, these images can also be seen as problematic; all the people (in both pictures) are white males, and this itself can be seen as perpetuating ideas of white paternalism and masculine domination. What figure 9 does sustain then, is the image of a white working class hero as someone who represents everything that is good about America, despite the potential problematic connotations of this.

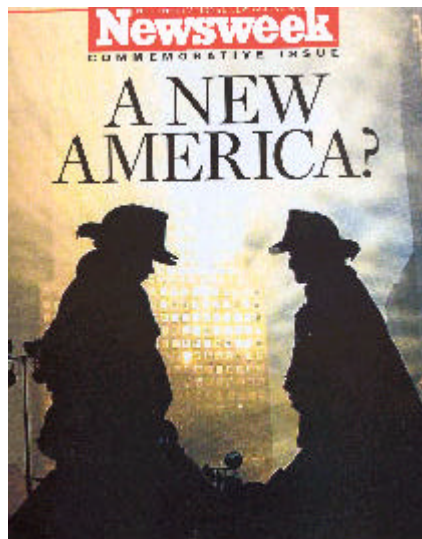


Figure 11: Front Cover of Newsweek, Fall 2001. Photo by Chris Corder - UPI.

The image used on the front cover of the 'commemorative issue' of Newsweek (figure 11) uses the silhouettes of firefighters against a sun lit background. Framed by the title 'A New America?', the symbolism of the image suggests that firefighters represent the hope for the 'New America'.

The arrogant wheeler-dealer ordering a \$600 bottle of wine – has vanished utterly as an icon, replaced by the laconic firefighter who risks his life for just about that much money per week.

(Adler, 2001).

This once again echoes the ideas surrounding vocation and dedication to work through service rather than for monetary reward. Figure 11, and many other images of the firefighters involved at Ground Zero, are reminiscent of those used to evoke images of the 'noble worker' and 'dignified labour'. Popular sculptures and pictures of workers/labourers in the former USSR, Nazi Germany and the US in the 1920s and 1930s are well documented and discussed (see Dabakis, 1999). The latter is perhaps of most relevance here, with images of 'ordinary' workers as heroic, and very much male-dominated work being the focus.

Figure 12 is a tribute to a firefighter involved in the September 11th operations, a tribute not unlike some of the sculptures of dignified workers, with pictures of angels flanking the exhausted fireman.



Figure 12: Angels flank an American firefighter at Ground Zero - Tribute.

Source: Aimster 2001.

This image could be said to be dramatising our understanding of what happened, but that they should be pictured with angels perhaps indicates the way people felt about the firefighters; that they were doing a job that no human should have to face alone is one possible interpretation.

Firefighting as Heroic Work?

How do all the elements and ideas that have been discussed in help, if at all, to perpetuate the idea that firefighters are heroes?

The stereotypical hero is male, strong and rugged, fighting against all odds regardless of their own safety, and, of course, just doing their job. According to the ideas discussed in this project, this could be a description of a firefighter.

Apparently there were many female firefighters involved in the rescue operations of September 11th, but of all the sources I looked at, I only found one, not very clear, picture of a female firefighter. Perhaps this is purely coincidence, or reflects the fact that only 74 of 11569 (0.64%) of firefighters in the New York fire service are females (figures Baigent 2001c). The idea that firefighters can be seen in certain imagery as being almost inherently masculine is important to the idea that they can be seen as heroes, as the stereotypes of both heroes and masculine firefighters reinforce one another, and exclude women.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that I have been necessarily selective and chosen images that support the arguments I wanted to make in this project. It may be argued that there are other images of firefighters that are not so flattering and perhaps contradict some of the points I have made. But the number of images and representations (such as the concerts and singles that have been held to raise money for the families of firefighters killed on September 11th) that I had to leave out meant that I did not have to search hard for material to support my arguments. It is also important to remember that this project was done following, and heavily influenced by, a widely reported event that portrayed firefighters as heroes on a scale perhaps not previously seen. The large number (343) of firefighters who sacrificed themselves to save others indicated what firefighters can and will possibly do for others. However, these were not singular acts of bravery. Each firefighter appeared ready to do this job, as has been seen on other occasions, but it was the scale of the events which reinforced the point:

The people of New York will remember, above all, those whose instinct was to run not in flight from the carnage but into it, with no way out.

At the end of this project then, perhaps one suitable question to ask is do we (the public) actually view firefighters as heroes? Whilst I have argued that many representations of firefighters can be found to support the idea that firefighters can be seen to display certain elements of heroism, it is not possible to know quite how this reflects 'public opinion'. Given the existence and apparent prevalence of such image, it would appear that, particularly in the current world climate, the work of firefighters is very much represented as heroic.

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