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THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE ENEMY

<http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-dehumanization-of-the-enemy/>

THE WORLD TODAY appears divided into two opposing camps: the realm of Good and the empire of Evil, the free world against the world of slavery, “crusaders” vs. “martyrs.” Yet, this riven field is also crossed by a sort of invisible mirror that deforms one’s own reflection. Despite their apparent difference and asymmetry, in fact, the two rivals follow a common strategy: the dehumanization of the enemy.

Behind these metaphors lies a deep crisis of the classical notions of war and peace, guilt and innocence, life and death. It is not merely the loss of the fundamental distinction between combatants and civilians that both suicide bombers and airstrike bombings signal. In the current situation, all the fundamental principles that gave birth to the Laws of War seem to collapse: spatial and temporal limitations of hostilities, proportionality of military actions, discrimination of targets, weapons and the just methods of using them. In this way, the “enemy” is transformed from a juridical concept into an “ideological object.” This figure, pushed to a climax from both these “invisible” and “mobile” fronts, becomes absolute and de-humanized.

Obama, Cameron and Hollande’s unwillingness to use ground troops against the “uncivilized,” as Kerry put it last year, is mirrored by ISIL’s call to intensify suicide missions against the “cowards.” But what lies behind the asymmetric confrontation between airstrikes and “humanstrikes,” behind the blurring of the distinctions between the state of war and the state of peace? What notion of humanity are the physical disengagement of the Western powers (with their tele-killing via drones and airstrikes) and the physical engagement of suicide bombers (ready to turn their bodies into a weapon) trying to convey? In other words, how and to what extent is there a connection between the automatization and biopoliticization

of war operated by Western powers and the sacrificial nature of the conflict adopted by those who want to fight these powers?

When the enemy is reduced to the empty image of “collateral damage” or the “inverted icon” of the crusader to be destroyed, a frightening abyss — in which all the legal covers sink — opens, leaving room only for naked violence and its intrinsic brutality. German jurist Carl Schmitt warned against this ideological drift. The figures of the enemies, he argued, are our existential reflections, the shaping of ourselves, the embodiment of our own question. Their dehumanization leads to the loss of our most intimate humanity. The dehumanizing mechanism rips human faces from the Others, thus transforming them into what is infinitely identical to itself and yet ontologically different, into the indefinite, abstract, and absolute Enemy of humanity: Islam, the West, America, the French, the Arabs. In this way, individual responsibilities are turned into collective ones: everyone is guilty, and no one is responsible.

Deprived of a face, fear becomes terror. For, terror is faceless presence, the shadow cast by our nightmares upon the Other who is omnipresent precisely because he is invisible, because he does not possess a human, familiar face. Terror is the black sun shining on the landscapes designed by our deepest anxieties, the endless night of our darkest alterity. But what does it mean to deny — un-dialectically erasing — the Other’s face?

The dehumanization of the enemy turns the use of violence, from an *extrema ratio* into “just-terror,” as the massacres of Paris last November were called by the official organ of the Islamic State; the Other as a less-than-human must “evaporate,” as *The Times* has defined the killing of “Jihadi John.” The Other is but the Nothingness to be annihilated: only when the last terrorist is wiped out shall we be saved, but our “violent salvation” cannot but produce new “terrorists.” Indeed, it is like trying to kill the night by stabbing it with a knife.

This is no moralizing game. What is at stake here is not the justification of a particular use of violence. This conflict — like all conflicts (and the troubled history of Palestine should serve as an example) — is fed by the violent *reciprocity* of weapons, by the ideological and moral figures borrowed from the disfigured or unfigured enemy. To restore the face of one’s own

enemy is a matter of humanitarian law, if it is true, as Giorgio Agamben has argued, that “in the silence of the face, and there alone, is mankind truly at home.”

One may be skeptical of this enterprise, and there certainly is no lack of reasons for our eventual skepticism as the Syrian war and the occupation of Palestine and Crimea continue to show us. Yet, this conflict — as every struggle — can only be saved by means of law and, above all, of Justice. Franz Kafka, with his life and work, offers us a beautiful metaphor for this.

One afternoon, while walking with Dora Diamant, his girlfriend at the time, in the Steglitz Park on the outskirts of Berlin, Kafka came across a little girl who was crying desperately. Worried, he asked her what had happened. The little girl, sobbing, said she had lost her doll. Seriously concerned, Kafka invented on the spot a long story to explain that absurd disappearance: the doll had left for a long journey; she was now married and lived happily in an exotic country. He knew these things because the doll had delivered a letter to his house. Every morning, for three weeks, Kafka, with total devotion close to exasperation, exercised his fantasy by writing and reading a letter to the little girl in order to give life and consistency to that imaginary world where the absent was present, and she could still live with serenity her dreams, memories and hopes. As Dora Diamant realized, in this beautiful story reported by the jurist Antonio Cassese, to *protect* the child “the lie was to be transformed into truth, through the truth of fiction.” Kafka knew that it was necessary to create a world to restore a moral order *with* the other, to each other. Fiction is the instrument by which we fill the abyss opened by our creaturely nullity. Justice, in this sense, is the sharing of our imaginary that restores to the Others their faces.

That is also the fate of international law. It can be seen as an “ethical lie” that must be constantly told and experienced in order to be believed; Law, in other words, must be incarnated in the face of the Other to become “true.” Only then does it become that ‘real fiction’ which makes the idea of justice meaningful. That is why, to break the bad unity of the world brought about by the dehumanization of the enemy, we need to revive our idea of justice. If we believe in humanity, we must grant it to our enemy.

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