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Nici om, nici fiară: dezumanizarea în violența directă și sistemică

Rezumat

Secolul XX a fost martorul unora dintre cele mai violente catastrofe ale istoriei umanității. Dezvoltarea tehnologiei armelor, a comunicațiilor, și militarizarea aerului, mării și pământului, au dus cu toate la o nouă capacitate a omenirii de a ucide în proporții masive. Totuși, unul dintre cele mai importante procese care s-a dezvoltat și care a permis omenirii să omoare pe o scară atât de largă are foarte puțin de-a face cu tehnologia, ci mai degrabă cu psihicul uman și cu manipularea acestuia prin folosirea cu abilitate a propagandei. Evoluția omenirii l-a lăsat pe om cu o frică înăscută de entitățile non-umane care pot reprezenta amenințări existențiale pentru bunăstarea sa. Militarii moderni, după ce și-au însușit asemenea convingeri de la autorii de antologii și de la psihologi, au încorporat propaganda “dezumanizantă” în cadrul pregătirii militare, astfel permițându-le soldaților să facă un by-pass din busola lor morală și etică, care i-ar opri de la a ucide. Argumentez în acest studiu că procesul de dezumanizare a “celuilalt” a permis umanității să ignore lipsa lor de înclinație naturală către violența directă asupra altora, astfel făcând războaiele mai eficiente, mortale și distructive. Dezumanizarea, susțin eu, nu este numai procesul de degradare a ființei umane către o entitate non-umană, ci și cel de atribuire a creaturilor “oarecum vii” cu atribute negative, ceea ce le face amenințătoare. În plus, pornind de la K. Marx și H. Marcuse, explorez procesul prin care dezumanizarea este ori rezultatul or pretextul care permite violența sistemică caracteristică lumii și vieții “societății prospere” capitaliste - o violență normativă ascunsă, care este acceptată de societate. Ambele forme de violență, directă și sistemică, sunt posibile doar când dezumanizarea este stabilită, acceptată și instalată.

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Neither Man nor Beast: Dehumanization in Direct and Systemic Violence

Summary

The 20th century has seen some of the worst violent catastrophes known to human history. The advancement of weapons technology, communications, and militarization of the air, sea, and land, have all led to the ability of mankind to kill on a massive scale. However, one of the most important processes that has been developed which has allowed mankind to murder on such a grand scale has little to do with technology, but with man's psyche and its manipulation through the skilled use of propaganda. Mankind's evolution has left him with an innate fear of non-human entities that pose existential threats to its well being. Modern militaries, having appropriating such knowledge from anthropologists and psychologists, have incorporated "dehumanizing" propaganda in their training, thus allowing soldiers to by-pass parts of their moral and ethical compass that would otherwise stop them from killing. I argue that the process of dehumanization of the "other" has allowed humankind to ignore their natural disinclination towards direct violence towards the others, thus making wars more efficient, deadly, and destructive. Dehumanization, I contend, is not only the process of demoting a human being to a non-human entity, but also assigning that "life-like" creature with negative attributes, which transforms them into a threat. Furthermore, drawing on K. Marx and H. Marcuse, I explore the process by which dehumanization is either the result of/or pretext to, a certain systemic violence that underscores the lifeworld in the "affluent society" of capitalism – a low-level normative violence that is accepted within society. Both forms of violence, direct and systemic, are only possible when dehumanization is established, accepted, and deployed.

Neither Man nor Beast: Dehumanization in Direct and Systemic Violence

Introduction

In any discussion of violence we have to examine the the conditions that make various forms of violence possible. What kind of policies, institutions, internal social divisions make genocide possible? What could have possibly facilitated the mechanized mass annihilation of a people that was Auschwitz? What allows a suicide bomber to strap explosives to them and kills scores of innocent people? What kind of thinking must be in place for a Dr. Mengele to do horrific experiments on innocent children? What mind-frame must be established for the perpetrator to not empathize with his/her victim? How is it possible for an individual, group, nation, or civilization to inflict grotesque violence upon those who cannot defend themselves? In this study, I will examine the process that is fundamental to understanding how violence can so easily be perpetrated on “others”: dehumanization. I will attempt to explicate some normative characteristic of dehumanization and illuminate how they operate within two forms of violence, both direct and structural (systemic). It is evident that within these three forms of violence, the outward manifestation of violence varies yet retains a tacit but essential consistency. Likewise, the process of dehumanizing the other appears differently within each form of violence, yet at its core, a thread of consistency remains. It will be my task to highlight the similarities and differences with the process and phenomenon of dehumanization that occurs in each of these forms of violence, and offer a theoretical model of dehumanization that can be applicable to all forms of violence. After I construct this model, I will conclude by asking the question as to whether or not there can be a form of violence without dehumanizing the ‘other.’ Could there be a “redemptive” violence that forbids the dehumanizing of the opponent? Can one kill without thinking of the other as being somehow humanely deficient?²

You are not Human

In Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, he likens Jews to parasites who live off the culture and labor of others; he connects their existence with the “Jewish disease” of syphilis and makes the claim that they are an existential threat to the world, but most immediately to Germany.³ Elsewhere in Nazi propaganda, including the many films by Dr. Goebbles, and *Der Stürmer*, an anti-Semitic newspaper published by Julius Streicher, the Jews of Europe are equated with rats, vermin, and pestilence; all things that are appropriately exterminated in order to preserve human health. Furthermore, Jews were associated with the “mad-dog” capitalism of the United States as well as the atheist Bolshevism of the Soviet Union, both equally seen by the fascists as an all

² As the Shoah / Holocaust is probably the most explicit case in the modern period of dehumanization, I will draw most of my examples from it to highlight the theoretical positions.

³ Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf* trans. Ralph Manheim. (New York: A Mariner Book / Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999) p. 150, 253, 308. The whole of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* can be read as an indictment of Judaism and Jews as opposed to the few pages I have cited.

encompassing threat to Germany and German *eigentlichkeit* (authenticity).⁴ In essence, “the Jew” was the ultimate manifestation of “evil” in the Nazi consciousness. As Horkheimer and Adorno stated, “for the fascists the Jews are not a minority but the *antirace*, the negative principle as such; on their extermination the world’s happiness depends.”⁵ As the antirace, the Jews had no redeemable qualities from which they could be saved from the historical necessity of their elimination. “The Jew” was the foundation of the Nazi’s *rassepolitik* (racial politics), and as such, it elicited the need for a “final solution to the Jewish Question” (*die Endlösung der Judenfrage*).⁶ For the German fascists, the Jew’s existence was not that of a social group within the human species, but a group of *human-resembling* life that was *not worthy of life*. In the minds of those that devised the extermination of the Jews at the Wannsee conference in 1942, the annihilation of the Jewish presence in Europe was not understood as a destruction of part of the human family, but the violent chemotherapy of a cancerous tumor in the heart of Europe. In their mind, that Jewish tumor left to itself would destroy Europe and thus the Nazis believed they were doing humanity a favor by exterminating the non-human enemy within.

Despite the bourgeois ‘coldness’ (as Adorno calls it) of the Nazi executioner, we know from reports that prior to the gas chambers, the massive execution of the Jews by shooting did have a negative effect on those soldiers who fired the bullets into the unarmed civilians: men, women and children. Done by the *Einsatzgruppen* (SS paramilitary death squads), who were dedicated extermination squads, these “ordinary” Germans would suffer from severe psychological trauma; bouts of depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies attributed to their executionary activities, which led to issues of low morale – as soldiers found less and less honor in executing those who couldn’t fight back, as opposed to fighting in combat against the western Allies and the Bolsheviks.⁷ Not only was there little honor in killing civilians, the executioners were within speaking distance of the executed, which played a significant role in their traumatic experiences with killing. Today we understand this psychological phenomenon to be *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD), which is common among combat veterans, especially those who are in close proximity with the human consequences of their violence.⁸ What’s more revealing than the fact that some of the *Einsatzgruppen* struggled with PTSD is the fact that so many appeared not to.⁹ We must ask ourselves, what could allow a young man, whom just two years ago was a schoolboy, an alter boy, a professing Catholic or Protestant, coldly look into the eyes of a young woman and her child, standing in a pit of sand or in some anonymous countryside, begging for their life in the same language spoken by the gunman, and still pull the trigger killing both mother and child? What prevented him from seeing his own mother, his wife, and his own children in the eyes of these victims? Why did empathetic inter-subjectivity fail to stop him from killing? The answer to this question has become increasingly clear throughout 20th century warfare; to overcome

⁴ Wolin, Richard. *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger*. (New York: Columbia University Press) pg. 96 – 130.

⁵ Horkheimer, Max & Adorno, Theodor. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) p. 137. My italics.

⁶ See Koonz, Claudia. *The Nazi Conscience*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press., 2003.) 103 – 130.

⁷ See Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

⁸ See Grossman, Lt. Col. Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996.) p. 281 – 289.

⁹ There was no official German military program to deal with this problem among soldiers so it is very difficult to find accurate information as to how many German soldiers actually struggled with PTSD.

such innate human empathy for the other, and to override the natural and cultural inhibitions against committing acts of violence, the victims had to be effectively dehumanized in the minds of the perpetrator – they were not victims, but something other than what would warrant empathy.

First, dehumanization can be understood as *a withdrawal or failure to extend recognition of the “others” human qualities (in total) and all the rights and respects it elicits, thus reducing the targeted individual or group to a conceptualization that posits them as being less than human.* Secondly, the target of dehumanization is not just *reduced* to something less than human, but must also warrant a negative or aggressive relationship with the perpetrator. There are plenty of non-human entities that do not elicit a negative or violent response. I do not want to destroy a tree or a table for being non-human because I perceive their existence as benign - neither good nor bad - but the dehumanized human-entity is not only reduced to the pseudo-inanimate object, but is thoroughly associated with negativity. He/She is destroyed as a human, and rebuilt/reconceptualized as a menacing and threatening “thing.” This second component of dehumanization is essential to a full conception of the phenomenon. Some theorists, including David Livingston Smith, professor of philosophy and evolutionary psychology at the University of New England, attempts to ascertain what exactly a “dehumanized” individual is dehumanized to. He points out that in ancient Greek culture, the Greeks understood the dehumanized other as being “barbaroi” (barbarians), while others, such as the Catholic church in the Middle Ages, understood the native Americans to be *human-like* creatures that were fit only for slavery.¹⁰ These human-like creatures were perceived as “counterfeit humans” due to their inherent lack of something inalienable to humans. If this something, which Smith like to refer to as the “essence” is missing in the human-like creature, than they cannot be human because the essence is understood to be *inalienable*. What is clear from a survey of cultures throughout written human history is that some “out-group” is a victim of dehumanization for a variety of reasons. What is *not* universally true is what that out-group is dehumanized to. A general theory abstracted away from the particular manifestation of historical dehumanization should serve as part of the definition of dehumanization; as opposed to finding exactly *what* a dehumanized person is, one should recognize that the out-group or individual will be dehumanized to *whatever elicits condemnation, disgust, or hostility* in a given culture, time and place, which is not always the same in every culture. As a theory, we need not create a new category of what a dehumanized human is, for the particular would not be universalizable, but we should understand that the dehumanized will be associated with *whatever* the perpetrator understands to be the most effective and or revolting thing a culture can produce.

The third component of dehumanization is what is operating behind the scenes; what Theodor Adorno describes as “identity thinking.”¹¹ For Adorno, the complexity and particularity of every victim (in his discussion of Auschwitz) is leveled down and essentialized into a conception. The uniqueness of every Jew, for example, was forcibly ignored for the singular concept of “the Jew” that would replace all particularity. To conceptualize an “identity” for what a Jew is, violently exculpated every recalcitrant characteristic (what Adorno calls the “remainder” - the unconceptualizable) of every individual, as their identity as an individual was sacrificed by the force of the similar concept. The 6 million Jews that were victims of fascism were conceptualized as “Der Jude”; the multiple became one concept. This radical diminishment of a segment of humanity into a sterile concept allowed the perpetrator to ignore and or reject the particularity of each and every person, thus no Jew was a person, but a *concept with life* that elicited hostility.

¹⁰ Smith. *Less Than Human*. 72 – 102.

¹¹ Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999.

Furthermore, the conceptualization or identification of all the Jews as “Der Jude” was coupled by another form of conceptualization, i.e. that of the Jews as the non-identity. Just as the Nazis were able to define (and therefore control) the Jewish population of Europe, they also understood and experienced Jews as the non-identical other, i.e. that which did not fit within the identity of what it meant to be a German or a member of the *Deutsches Volk*. This double-conception, that the ‘other’ is ‘this and only this’, which by design maintains them as ‘not us and never will be us’, is the double negativity of identity thinking. Because they are 1) this perpetual foreign element which 2) can never be an organic part of the identity of ‘us,’ we must 3) relate to them in accordance to how we define them. If we define them as ambivalent or benign, then they can be ignored; if we define them as a threat, then we must relate to them as a threat.

This leads us to the fourth part of a comprehensive understanding of dehumanization; the fear of the ‘other’ as a looming or menacing threat. It is possible to dehumanize someone or a group to something non-threatening. For example, if someone were to see a subgroup act in such a way that they associate that group with animal like characteristics, although they dehumanize them, they do not necessarily fear them. They may say that this group acts like dogs, chimpanzees, cockroaches, or pigs. Because one group or individual associates this other group with subhuman characteristics does not automatically make them subject to violence or even the thought of responding violently. However, the form of dehumanization that does warrant fear is precisely the kind of conceptualization of the ‘other’ that makes them a threat to the in-group, the nation, race, etc. The form of dehumanization that elicits a violent response is the kind of dehumanization that links the dehumanized to a image or concept that is threatening; it diminishes them into a single or cluster of threatening characteristics. Had the Jews been associated with butterflies, squirrels, or any other non-human entity that isn’t threatening, they would not have been understood as a threat. However, they were associated with disease, pestilence, and creatures that provoke disgust and most importantly, fear. This association of the dehumanized with entities that elicit violent responses, allows the perpetrator(s) to understand themselves and their actions as being one of self-defense against some entity that would do them harm if they are left unattended. In matters of self-defense, nearly all is permissible. Furthermore, if this perceived threat is within the nation-state itself, it makes the feeling of urgency all the more acute, as it becomes a matter of human survival against this threatening presence within.

The fifth component of dehumanization is more of a practical matter, but one that is necessary for violence to occur against the dehumanized population, if it is going to be understood as being legitimate. In my estimation, dehumanization and the reconceptualization of the ‘other’ as a threat is one among many things that must already be established and operating within a population in order to implement mass violence or a genocide. It is clear from a review of genocide in different areas of the world, be it in Nazi Europe, Rwanda, Bosnia, etc., genocidal practices are most effective if there is a history prior to the current politics of conceptualizing the ‘other’ as something contemptible or threatening. However, stereotypes and biased opinions about other subgroups and or individuals are often times not enough to provoke mass violence towards the other. Yet, they can be understood as the first steps towards a process of dehumanization. If a population understands what it means to be human is to share a certain culture, norms, values, habit, etc., and for the most part this subgroup shares those characteristics, a mobilization of violence by an authority against the subgroup will most likely not be met with much enthusiasm (as is the case in the U.S. concerning certain subgroups. Even the Japanese during WWII where rounded up, but their humanity was respected (although insulted) and where not exterminated as

subhumans). What the process of dehumanization effectively does is tap into those preconceived notions and stereotypes about the ‘other’ and amplifies them in degree, making them a total outsider who shares none of the society’s principles, values, etc. Even if they appear to, it is understood as being part of their cunning and deceptive nature, which only makes them appear more dangerous. Although stereotyping is not necessarily dehumanization, it is a form of conceptualization (in the Adorno sense) that leads to the believability of the threatening image of the other once systematic dehumanization is deployed. It is as if to say, “We already know these people are A, so they then must be B, what the Government now says they are.” What’s more important is that the stereotypes of the ‘other’ lay the *foundation for credibility* for the newly propagated narrative that is the hallmark of systematic dehumanization. For Example, Hitler tapped into the deep-seated historical animosity of the Jews in Europe, despite the fact that it was primarily a religious anti-Semitism, whereas the Third Reich had a biological anti-Semitism. The prior resentment of the Jews, for being the “Christ-Killers” was *compounded* by Nazi propaganda; it did not however seek to eliminate the religiously inspired hatred for the Jews, despite the fact that fascism was a secular phenomenon and found the religious hatred of Jews to be an inadequate and a foolish explanation of their real threatening nature. For religious anti-Semites, not only were the Jews and their recalcitrance a theological threat to the truth of Christianity, Hitler now uncovered how the Jews were also an existential threat to Christendom/Europe itself – a double threat. The first indictment, the historical-theological, laid the legitimation for the second indictment, the existential-biological, for if they couldn’t be trusted in religious matters, how could they be trusted in political, social, and economic matters.¹² Now, they were both Christ-Killers and a biological threat. Once again, the Jews became the antithesis of all things truly German and threatened the very existence of the German people. The collective embrace of anti-Semitic propaganda, both historical and modern, served to legitimate the violence done upon the Jews during the Shoah. Not only was it *sehr gut und richtig* for the Nazis to eliminate the threat posed by *Der Jude*, but the existential fear imbued into the population legitimated the authorities in doing so. Having the proper authority, with the proper legitimation, rooted in historical and modern accusations against the Jews, engulfed by a blanket of fear, coupled with a sense of empowerment that the Nazis delivered to the population, violence on a mass scale could be unleashed.

Dehumanization in Direct Violence

We can understand “direct violence” as being *the intentional infliction of harm, bodily or psychologically, upon an individual, group, or nation by another individual, group, or nation*. In addition to that, we should also add that direct violence is *a physical attack by one entity upon another; in an attempt to injure, maim, kill, or in anyways harm the other entity*. Direct violence understood this way is not mediated by a system that remains relatively anonymous, as in structural violence, but has specific actors with specific motivations, with specific goals, and the harm is experienced imminently. Examples of direct violence can be an individual against another individual, as in domestic abuse, rape, battery, etc, a group on an individual, as in a lynching, mob violence, etc., or nation upon another nation, as in an invasion or a “preemptive strike,” etc. The 20th century gave us direct violence on a massive scale; i.e. genocide, *totalen krieg*, nuclear warfare,

¹² See Carroll, James. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001) p. 475 – 543, and Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. p. 144 – 147.

biological and chemical warfare, etc. Asymmetrical warfare has been the hallmark of violence in the early part of the 21st century, as there has been an increase in non-state actors or groups, i.e. terrorist organizations such as al-Qae'da, who attack nation states, albeit through single acts of terrorism as opposed to full scale nation-state driven invasions. Regardless of the differences in method of and motivation for, whether orchestrated or contingent, the essence of this form of violence is that 1) it is an immediate event occurring directly between one actor upon (or between) another, 2) the victim of direct violence experiences the violence as something that occurs to them imminently and 3) that the actor(s) within the violent event are identifiable. Furthermore, Johan Galtung, philosopher of cultural violence, identifies how direct violence insults the “four classes of basic human needs”; these are survival needs, well-being needs, identity needs, and freedom needs.¹³ Yet for the purpose of our study, we need not rethink Galtung’s typology of direct violence, but we must ask how does dehumanization allow for the various forms of direct violence to occur? How does dehumanization override the ability or inclination of the perpetrator to recognize and identify with those four basic human needs in the other? How does dehumanization play a factor in negating the *survival need* until it ends in death, the *well-being need* into misery, the *identity need* into alienation, and the *freedom need* into repression?¹⁴

If we understand dehumanization as the precondition to violence, then we must accept the idea that the perpetrator of violence is, at least in the moment of violence, not accepting the ‘humanity’ of the other; that they have rescinded their recognition of the humanity of the other or have failed to extend that recognition, and thus the rights and respects that a full conception of humanity would warrant have been rejected or neglected. In the moment of violence, the victim has been reduced to something other than a full human being (in the mind of the perpetrator) and stands before the violent actor as but a target - a means to an end – an object on which to release ones aggression. Direct violence is the cancellation of mutual perspective taking, mutual respect, discourse, and leaves the participants in a distorted inter-subjectivity; one that is characterized by a imbalance in power, force, autonomy, subjective freedom, and self-determination. Both dehumanization and violence have a immense impact on the psychology of the perpetrator. In the process of violence against the other, the perpetrator is unilaterally takes the opportunity to unleash aggression – transforming himself, by exercising his will upon the other, while at the same time physically deforming the victim physically and psychologically. The self-induced transformation that the perpetrator feels is often times the overcoming of personal alienation, helplessness, and his crippled autonomy. By his creative destruction of the other, he overcomes is inability to creatively construct, via discourse, or even control his own life; thus allowing his capacity to impact his environment to be fulfilled, albeit in a destructive way. Thus if the struggle for recognition goes unrecognized in the creative realm, the destructive realm will provide such recognition.¹⁵

¹³ Galtung, Johan. *Cultural Violence in Violence and its Alternatives: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 40.

¹⁵ See Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit* in *On Violence: A Reader*. Ed. Bruce B. Lawrence & Aisha Karim, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 27 – 38., and Fromm, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

The Importance of Distance in Direct Violence

Why is it that the pilot of a B-17 “flying fortress,” who kills thousands of people, does not garnish the same kind of disgust as that of the commandant of a Nazi death camp? Why are the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* (death squads) so universally condemned while Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris is not when his bombers kills just as many if not more innocent men, women, and children in WWII? Why is it that many in the U.S. celebrate the pilots that dropped the nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki when we condemn summary execution of prisoners of war? What is the cognitive phenomenon that makes one act of mass killing acceptable and another incomprehensible? Although dehumanization is operative in direct violence perpetrated by the individual, group, or nation, the issue of ‘distance’ from the direct violence itself plays an important role on how dehumanization functions. Both murder (as in a street crime) and bombing from 20,000 feet above a target city are forms of direct violence; as the actors are identifiable, the violence is an event, and it is experienced as immediate. However, the degree to which dehumanization is a necessary tool to cope with the psychological trauma that is associated with killing an individual or a group of people depends on whether the actors are in close proximity or mediated by a long distance. When looking at the degree of physical destruction that was brought about by the Assyrian King Sennacherib on Babylon in 689 BCE, which decimated an entire population and their cities, and the destruction inflicted on Germany and Japan through incendiary bombs, it is almost indistinguishable.¹⁶ Although the physical destruction may be similar, the psychological toll on the victims and the perpetrators is tremendous different. For those in close combat or actively engaged in fighting or killing individuals or groups of people, where they have to directly experience the sight, smell, feeling, etc. the act of killing, the screams of agony, the pleas for mercy, the massacring of children, and anguish of watching a daughter or mother being raped, and/or death itself, etc., the need for dehumanization, which allows for the cognitive distancing of the perpetrator, i.e. the disengagement with the humanity of the victim, is much greater. To openly accept the humanity of the victim, and therefore recognize their suffering as the suffering of a human being, and thus the suffering that the perpetrator could also experience as a human being, remains an overpowering experience; one that could jeopardize the mental health and stability of the perpetrator himself, which would render him/her an ineffective and or defective soldier. In order to escape this experience, the victims are conceptually understood as not being of the same moral or biological family as the victim. This of course isn’t systematically rationalized during the act of killing, but often remains the default mode from which the mind defends itself from experiencing sympathy or empathy with the victims. It is precisely because the perpetrator has the potential to afford sympathy and empathy to the other that the mind defends itself via dehumanization. As we have seen throughout history, this defensive mental posture is the product of systematic or comprehensive conditioning (either through state propaganda, military training, cultural indoctrination, etc.). On the one hand, those responsible for the bombing of cities, whether they be Dresden, London, Hiroshima, etc. who understand that they are killing women and children by the thousands, continue to have a similar relationship to their victims as the combat soldier, executioner, etc., i.e. a relationship of murderer and murdered, but they nonetheless have a very different *personal* experience of the act of killing. Although they are often the products of the same conditioning via propaganda, training, or indoctrination, the distance that technology, in this case the planes and the bombs, affords them also limits their ability to experience the direct violence that they inflict

¹⁶ Grossman, Lt. Col. Dave. *On Killing* pg. 102.

firsthand. The indoctrination concerning the ‘inhuman’ character of the victims becomes one of cold rationality – it is not experienced as an emotional-psychological necessity such that one can kill efficiently. Although the beliefs may remain, the psychological defense mechanism that dehumanization provides for the killer is almost inconsequential for the killer in the sky, as he removed from the direct experience of the suffering, the cries of agony, the screams of horror, the smell of burning humans, etc.¹⁷ He kills from afar, and may never see his victims. Paradoxically, the instrumental reason he deploys reduces the victims to numbers, “targets,” “goal,” as opposed to humans or even “human-like” creatures that the soldier/murderer on the ground has to experience in his form of killing. The killer on the ground, even if he believes his victims to be vermin, diseased, subhuman, etc., has to directly experience their suffering; an event not registered in the catalog of experiences of the bomber-pilot. In essence, the murderer who is in a close proximity of his victim has an necessary and emotional need to dehumanize based on what he imminently experiences as he kills; this serves to protect his mental stability by shielding him from guilt of not offering empathy and compassion to the other but by doing just the opposite in the act of killing, whereas the pilot has a more distant and abstract relationship with the victims that the distance between the two affords. This distance makes the mental anguish at seeing and experiencing the suffering of the other an affair of the imagination. He can imagine what it would be like to be at the receiving end of his bombs, but he wasn’t there to experience the immediate effects of his actions. His killing, although it may be many times greater in number than those on the ground, does not provoke the same sense of empathy and compassion that the soldier on the ground is tempted to offer (but must refuse). In this case, technology, and the instrumental reason that gives it birth, allows us to kill more efficiently with less mental damage to the perpetrator – an accomplishment that not even dehumanization could do. In modern warfare, technology now provides the necessary physical distance between the perpetrator and the victims whereas once it was only the phenomenon of dehumanization that could provide a mental distancing. Technology is our modern dehumanization.

Humanizing to Dehumanize

World War II gave us a keen insight into how the mind operates when it is asked to kill another human being, especially when that other human being resembles the perpetrator himself. Writing about the natural resistance to killing, also known as “buck fever,” Army psychologist Lt. Col. Dave Grossman writes,

That the average man will not kill even at the risk of all he holds dear has been largely ignored by those who attempt to understand the psychological and sociological pressures of the battlefield. Looking another human being in the eye, making an independent decision to kill him, and watching as he dies due to your action combine to form the single most basic, important, primal, and potentially traumatic occurrence of war. If we understand this, then we understand the magnitude of the horror of killing in combat.¹⁸

Although the culture of the warrior-soldier does not allow for the open admittance of the

¹⁷ Ibid. pg. 105.

¹⁸ Grossman. *On Killing* pg. 31.

inability to target the other and take their life from them, the attempt to escape the “magnitude of the horror of killing in combat” was a common occurrence. Unlike we’d expect, desertion from one’s military unit was not the primary way of escaping such horror; to the contrary, those soldiers fighting with their units stayed, but they did not fire directly at the enemy, or often failed to fire their weapon at all. For the U.S. Army combat historian S. L. A. Marshall, the resistance to “killing a fellow man” which spared him from accepting the “responsibility” of the death of another, turned many combat soldiers into “conscientious objectors” on the battlefield.¹⁹ The horror and terror of turning another person, whom the potential killer recognizes as a full human being (regardless of the claims of dehumanization), into a corpse, was deflected by their willful non-firing or miss-firing of their weapons. Obviously from a military perspective this was a troubling revelation; how does one effectively neutralize the opposition if the soldiers will not shoot at them? How does one win a battle if one’s soldier would rather drink a beer with the opponent than kill him? The answer resided in the traditional nature of military training. Throughout World War II, U.S. Soldiers trained on inanimate targets, often red and white bulls-eyes. Later the military would learn that this training did not effectively prepare the soldier to fire at humans once in combat. This revelation brought about a change in the way the U.S. military trained its soldiers. The new targets were animated and no longer resembled the stationary ‘humanless’ targets used in previous training. The ultimate problem in combat was the enemy Heinrich looked a lot like Pvt. Henry; Friedrich looked a lot like specialist Fred, and Wilhelm looks like me. How can one kill someone whom you see one’s own reflection in? This disconnect between training and combat which stemmed from an ill-conceived “dehumanization” of the enemy paradoxically led to a less efficient and effective fighting force. In this case, reducing the Germans (and Japanese) into an inanimate target failed to prepare them for killing real humans in combat.²⁰ Post WWII, Marshall’s study on the “non-firing” soldiers affected the way in which training was conducted. If one was to visit any military base in the U.S. today where soldiers are being trained for combat, one would see that the targets are now in the shape of human figures and in motion on the firing range, simulating a real military engagement with humans. Because of this, according to Grossman, firing rates have risen from 15% in WWII to 90% by Vietnam.²¹ This proves to be a paradoxical situation, where the object of training, the target, must be humanized (given human like characteristics, i.e. form and motion) so that the process of dehumanization in combat can be effectively employed. With training that is more attuned to how the human mind naturally resists harming or killing another individual, military forces have been able to harness the power of dehumanization through a regiment of “condition and response” training – the condition appears, the response is enacted, and the moral question of killing disappears from the equation. In many ways, this new form of dehumanization doesn’t specifically characterize the “other” by there “otherness,” but simply as a thing that must be neutralized. Today’s soldier is trained to bypass that part of his mind that thinks about the ramifications of killing and teaches him/her to simply “respond” to the threat.²² I call this new dehumanization the process of “non-humanization,” as the humanity or sub-humanity of the other is not even considered – they are reduced to nothing but an inanimate target. This new training has proved effective in the latest wars,

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 29

²⁰ This was not due to a lack of propaganda, as the Germans and Japanese were consistently referred to as being animals, savages, and other pejorative terms that hinted at their 'inhumanity.'

²¹ Grossman. *On Killing* pg. 35.

²² This is not to say that a fair amount of dehumanization doesn't occur within military forces. Arabs and Afghans are often dehumanized by coalition soldiers, but that form of dehumanization, in terms of propaganda, is not a part of their military training.

but has not been perfected, as the staggering levels of PTSD in the latest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have proven.

Dehumanization in Systemic Violence

Unlike direct violence, which by its graphic nature makes it imminently intelligible and therefore appropriate matter for mass media, structural violence, or “systemic violence”, operates as the social-political and economic framework which makes direct violence identifiable. Direct violence, or what Slavoj Žižek refers to as “subjective violence,” is understood as a disruption of the normal “peaceful” state of social relations – a non-violent zero level of the daily lifeworld.²³ However, systemic violence is hidden precisely within the “normative” state of social relations – those distorting and aggressive social, political, and economic forces which are not immediately intelligible to individuals precisely because they are normative. By “normative” we must think in terms of common forms of aggression, suppression, and social forces that act against the will of the individual, which society comes to accept, either willfully or through a neglect of reflection, that are understood as being the “natural” state of affairs in mankind. For example, many individuals believe that alienated labor is simply a fact of life, and is an inherent part of human history since humans began to labor. As such, one need not think of another way of constructing a mode of labor and labor relations that would diminish and or abolish an alienated existence. Because it is seen as “natural,” to try and reconfigure how the system operates and direct it towards a more rational and equitable trajectory, would be a crime against nature and history. For most, there is an unconscious acceptance of the status-quo (which in reality is an artificial construct – not a natural one - that is produced by humans for the benefit of some humans over others). This masking of particular political-economic and social interests is what Marx identifies as “ideology,” and the masking of it behind the veil of nature is “reification.” This acceptance of the violence and coercion within the system as being natural and therefore unchangeable is a hallmark of systemic violence. Yet we must understand the nature of systemic violence in order to understand that which makes direct violence possible or at minimum contributes to the prevalence of direct violence.

Systemic violence displays the following hallmark characteristics: 1) it produces socially caused harms that could have been avoided, 2) those harms are not necessarily intended, but are the results of the functioning of the system and its reproduction, 3) authorities accept the inevitable harms that are created by the functioning of the system, 4) the system is the structure created to advance certain political and economic goals, although it presents itself as being a ‘natural’ phenomenon that corresponds to human nature, 5) the violence is ideologically masked so that it does not appear obvious to the individual or group within which violence they live, 6) ruthlessly pursues its goals regardless of the effect it may have on social relations, human health, individuals, or the environment, 7) it understands itself to be self-correcting and self-perpetuating – so that it can provide the remedy to any social ills it may produce without ever having to go outside of the system for correction, and thus secure its stable reproduction.

It is too easy to examine authoritarian societies such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to envision how this type of society works. In fact, the systemic violence in an authoritarian society isn’t often masked, but is openly demonstrated to quell any form of

²³ Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence*. (New York: Verso, 2008) p. 2.

opposition, but also to send a political message to those who would question its authority.²⁴ We are more concerned with societies that on the surface appear to be peaceful, but a critical look behind the veneer would demonstrate a society that is predicated on a stealth violence that remains veiled from most of society. However for this study, we want to ask a difference set of questions, ones that should lay out the conditions for the possibility of having such a society pervaded by systemic violence. We have to ask, what is the role of dehumanization in this equation? How does dehumanization make such a quiet brutalization of a population possible? Who is dehumanized in such a society? How are they dehumanized, and why does it remain tacit?

If we conclude that there is an inherent violence build within the system, and that dehumanization is necessary to enact that violence, than we must conclude that dehumanization is an integral part of systemic violence; in fact it is necessary to understand that systemic violence would be predicated on systemic dehumanization. What does dehumanization look like in a political-economic system from which a tacit form of violence is normative? First, if we take Herbert Marcuse's "affluent society as our model, then we must understand that the nature of systemic violence is such that it doesn't make itself known to be violent outside of certain intellectual and counter-culture circles (the theory inclined), and therefore the violence that is done upon the population is relatively unperceived. What would follow from this line of argument is that the process of dehumanization in that affluent society, which is inherent within the violence, also remains hidden or unperceived behind the veil of affluence. Individuals within a system, operating and functioning everyday in their lifeworld, do not recognize a structure that systematically dehumanizes them. However, what is not experience explicitly, is understood implicitly through the experience of alienation, although they remain oblivious to its existence. The systemic violence of capitalism for example, fails to extend full recognition of human needs and desires as it diminishes their lifeworld to that of units that produce surplus value, and medicates the resulting alienation with the culture industry. In his Economic and Philosophic manuscripts of 1844, Marx commented that the alienated (or estranged) man only experiences himself as fully human when he is performing the basic human functions: eating, defecating, sleeping, and having sex, etc. Outside of this, he does not belong to himself – his species-being is reduced to inanimacy - his time is sold to his employer, who in returns leaves him with just enough resources to sustain himself in his base needs (which Marx, quoting Adam Smith, likens this kind of life on a wage to the status of cattle), he lives an alienated existence – alienated from the product of his labor, nature, other human beings, and himself.²⁵ That which makes us human, the ability to transcend our conditions if given adequate time and resources, our ability to imagine different possibilities and direct our labor toward them, our being at home with ourselves and our environment, our use of reason, our solidarity with others, and our ability to transform nature into something that reflects us in an unalienated way, is radically diminished within the coordinates of capitalism, as it is subsumed to the demands of capital. For Marx, the systemic violence of capitalism is the reduction of the individual to a thing, a beast of burden, a machine among machines; and what is most essential to capitalism is the mass acceptance of the "thinghood" that the individual becomes. This reification of human existence and the labor relations between capitalist and worker, the exploited and the exploiter, leaves the worker at the mercy of his employer – he/she becomes not the determiner of his own life, his own

²⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1970) p. 44 – 47, also see Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Authoritarianism*. New York: A Harvest Book, 1976.

²⁵ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. trans. Martin Milligan, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988) pg. 20.

experiences, nor his own existence; those things are determined by the needs of capitalism. According to Marx, the worker,

even in the condition of society most favorable to the worker, the inevitable result for the worker is overwork and premature death, decline to a mere machine, a bond servant of capital, which piles up dangerously over against him, more competition, and for a section of the workers starvation or beggary.²⁶

The worker, “even in the conditions of society most favorable,” still is reduced to a status of less than his full humanity, as his value in a society does not spring from his creativity, his intellect, his morality, social values, religious faith, family life, etc., but by what he can provide for the system of capitalism that will contribute to its growth and reproduction. He is, as Marx claims, “brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity.”²⁷ For Marx, just as things as commodities are bought and sold in the market, so is the worker a commodity – someone who has to sell himself to capitalists and whose labor and the fruits of their labor capitalists can sell to others. Modern workers, in their alienated existence, are dehumanized to commodities, and the resulting “low-level” violence that they experience on a daily basis determines their lifeworld.

However, changes in capitalism from its industrial period to the form of corporate capitalism prevalent today, allow for a certain expression of these individual characteristics, values, principles, etc., as long as they are in service to capital via their being transformed as commodities, or contributing to the process of exchange. The “affluent society,” as Herbert Marcuse identified the capitalist society in 20th century Western world, is one that appropriates the talents, values, etc., of the workers and directs them into the capitalist mode of existence – thus often allowing some workers to project a portion of who and what they are in the market outside of just their brute labor. Their talents and ideas do not exist for themselves, but only find legitimacy and recognition if they can be made useful in the capitalist exchange process. Because of this investment into the status quo, and because of a modified form of capitalism (Roosevelt capitalism) that provides a certain level of welfare to a nation’s population, this society has been able to develop the “material and even cultural needs of man,” and thus deprive the demand for liberation from capitalism of its “mass basis.”²⁸ If we take Marcuse’s position seriously, then not only does capitalism, even in its modified form, dehumanize its participants, but it also has co-opted their loyalties.²⁹ The demand for liberation from the dehumanization of capitalism is without mass support because the victims of capitalism are now its defenders. The proletariat, who in Marx’s theory is the agent of revolutionary change, has become the praetorian guard of capital, its staunchest defenders. In this situation, what is still possible within the coordinates of capitalism is a slight modifications of particular legislation, regulation, etc., without ever rupturing the overall general framework of the market and exchange process, and nor does it radically modify the cultural superstructure that accompanies global capitalism. Marcuse writes,

If the need is for changing intolerable conditions of existence, with at least a reasonable chance that this can be achieved within the established society, with

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 23.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 23.

²⁸ Marcuse, Herbert. *Liberation from the Affluent Society*. In *Violence and its Alternatives*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) p. 266.

²⁹ Raising the standards of living for first world workers is predicated on the exploitation of third world workers, thus making the first world workers the co-exploiters of third world labor.

the growth and progress of the established society, then this is merely quantitative change. Qualitative change is a change of the very system as a whole.³⁰

In a society that basically accepts the rules of the established system, what passes for discourse in the public sphere is not how there should be a radical recreation of society (qualitative change), but a more modest discussion of reforming the already existing society – *dehumanization with a smiling face*. The very language that can be used to discuss the system is established by the system itself. As Marx commented in the *German Ideology*, “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”³¹ Thus the very cognitive and conceptual tools from which to critique the prevailing system are gifts from the prevailing system – can we then, with this limited philosophy, break out of the mold of the already existing system, or are we doomed to just modify it, which would preserve its systemic dehumanization and violence?

What is essential about systemic violence, is that it reduces the individual to a state of dependency on the system itself, either via the wage that barely sustains the worker and his family and insures that he will be compliant and submissive to the owner’s demands, or through the co-option of the worker by the affluent society – so that another system seem entirely impossible and in fact undesirable due to the workers personal investment into the already established society. In either case, the individual is dehumanized to his economic life – and that only if he can contribute to the growth and reproduction of capitalism itself. He accepts this dehumanized status, either against his will (as in the radicalized industrial worker of the 19th century, or willingly (as in the fully invested corporate worker of today), and agrees to be determined by the very system that violently caused him to submit. Furthermore, structural violence is directed at those who refuse to allow their lives to be determined by the coordinates of capitalism, i.e. submit their talents and labors to the market and its well-being, by conferring on them a “social death.” Those who do not distort their lifeworld within the parameters that are dictated, appear within society as the misfits, homeless, the poor, i.e. the sum of all non-conformists. Even those who should be the most non-conformist, i.e. the intellectuals, the philosophers, the theologians, as their disciplines that are historically rooted in the non-identification with what is the case, are co-opted within the system. With the co-option of the proletariat, it is only among the poor, the destitute, the racially excluded, the religiously maligned, etc. that the prophetic-revolutionary possibility remains, but they lack the cultural and political-social authority/credibility to speak to those within the system, and thus their voices often go unheard. Ultimately, this economic system has determined the rules of its existence, all are forced to play by those rules, if they do not regulate their lives by those rules, and they will be forced into a social death seemingly by some anonymous force. But by escaping one form of dehumanization, do they find themselves free, or simply dehumanized by another conceptualization? That is a question for a later date.

Because capitalism operates in the daily life as an anonymous system of rules and regulations, inter-subjective relationships, and “free” exchange, members within the system rarely understand each other as being dehumanized. What this means is that the person need not retreat into a psychological projection of the other as being less-than-human, but directly experiences the other as fully human. It is not the individual person within the system that dehumanizes, although

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 267.

³¹ Marx, Karl. *German Ideology: Part I* in the *Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1978) pg. 146 – 200.

it fully conceivable that some do dehumanize others within a system that reproduces itself antagonistically, but the system itself dehumanizes all. Since all are dehumanized, none are singled out. It is only when direct violence, that which appears on the surface of society, but rooted within the dehumanized antagonism inherent within the society, that we can identify an explicit form of dehumanization within an “event.” Systemic violence is not eventful, and therefore does not appear on the evening news. It is the *normative* violence that operates within the system’s routine functioning that makes it anonymous, and thus difficult to identify. As such, capitalist ideological claims advance the notion of a “violent-free society,” and thus the apex of what is political and economically possible for humanity. If there is no violence outside of direct and contingent violence, then there is no systemic dehumanization. But this is ideology at its purest.

Conclusion

As we can see, dehumanization plays an important role in the conditions that make direct and systemic violence possible, but conceptualizing the targeted group to being something less than human, and warranting aggression. Direct violence, which is immediately intelligible, takes place against the backdrop of systemic violence, which creates the necessary conditions for the direct violence within a society. If we are going to eradicate direct violence, then we must look towards the very system that produces it. If we are going to critically engage that system, then we must comprehend the role that dehumanization plays in producing and reproducing a system that is guided by systemic violence. Dehumanization, or the neglect or withdrawal of recognition from the other as a full human, has to be eliminated if violence is to end.