Some Remarks on Mass Murders, Social Darwinism and Mysticism in the 20th Century

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Introduction

Obviously, neither massacres (El-Kenz, 2005) nor the vocabulary and discourse of enmity and purity of the in-group, in opposition to a polluted or dehumanized Other (Douglas, 2002), are uncommon phenomena in world history. It is well known that in some periods, such as that of the Catholic Reconquista in Spain, otherness has been defined in terms of criteria of ancestry and blood relations (Poliakov, 1966-1971; Héritier, 1996-1999).

Thus, modernity did not invent mysticism of nature and myths of redemption (Traverso, 2003; Hinton, 2002:9-10), that went so strongly hand-in-hand with 20th-century mass murders, but rather inherited them. Still, the ideologies and praxis of war in the 19th and 20th centuries, which also benefited from new means of communication, scientific resources and technical skills, brought about considerable changes in the language and praxis of enmity. New concepts and new coercive methods against enemy groups, understood as biological entities (Rouzeau & Becker, 2003), were elaborated through doctrinal prophecies (Bénichou, 1977) and modern wars, particularly the colonial wars and World War I (Reimann, 2000) which was one of the first total wars in history. Biological categories have been much more widely used than before, and, more importantly, they have been politically and scientifically legitimized. Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, the emergence and spread of social-Darwinism brought unprecedented scientific backing to these categories. This facilitated interpretation of old mystical frameworks of blood purity, meta-historical missions, and conceptions of human groups as organically bounded brotherhoods, as constitutive natural and scientific truths. In spite of its irrevocable specificity, the Holocaust itself can be apprehended through the single framework of an entirely new worldview that was mystical, millenarian and scientific all at once. As Zygmunt Bauman put it, Modern civilization was not the Holocausts sufficient condition; it was, however, most certainly its necessary condition. 

This article will review the findings of certain scholars concerning the link between social-Darwinism and mass-murders. I will underline how the mystical and biological redefinition of language and vocabulary played a decisive role in the construction of enmity and enemy groups and also, consequently, in the legitimization of massacres, related to war conditions or not, throughout the 20th century. Language is not understood as an autonomous category here; instead, it is a part of a wide range of symbolic and visual tools for communication (cartoons, films, depictions of physical or olfactory specificities). All of these tools for communication can be used as vehicles of symbolic violence against a designated or constructed enemy group.

As Victor Klemperer observed, not only does language name objects and feelings, but through its own transformations in a given historical context and power relations, it also creates new cognitive categories which are accepted as meaningful, such as the concept of dejudification in Nazi Germany (Klemperer, 2000). A radically transformed language can name, classify or declassify ethnic, racial and political groups as enemies, it can qualify or disqualify them, and it can legitimize new forms of coercion against them as scientifically, morally and legally obligatory acts (Steiner, 1967; Edelmann, 1988). It naturalizes the newly elaborated warlike categories and has them recognized as natural ones. Moreover, a language is not just a set of words and concepts: it is also scansion, intonations and gestures (Tchokhotine, 1992). The ways in which words are pronounced and articulated matter as much as their content. Finally, as Nazi discourse has demonstrated, linguistic chaos (i.e. the repetition of a small number of words in a deliberately chaotic discursive order) can create a sense of extreme fear and extreme hope, a feeling of being in the final stage of war between good and evil, the outcome of which will depend solely on individuals consenting to sacrifice themselves (Haffner, 2002; Klemperer, 2000).
Enmity and Social-Darwinism

The designation of a group as a biological enemy has little to do with enmity as it has been theorized in various theories of war from different parts of the world, or even as it was defined and advocated by Carl Schmitt. It is widely known that to Schmitt (1996), enemies did not exist as such and, therefore, had nothing to do either with nature, or with ethnic and political differences. An enemy was always constructed for social and political reasons. Thus, enmity was both a political principle and the sine qua non condition of the very existence of politics. [2] In contrast, in the biological definition of enmity, a religious or ethnic group is designated as an enemy not because of its warlike behavior, but simply because of its very biological existence. Racism, which Bauman defines as a form of social engineering, defines the existence of one's own group with a purely medical vocabulary racial health, unwertes Leben, (useless lives) elimination, reduction, Lebensraum (vital space of a biologically defined human group) (Bauman 2002:118) and makes any coexistence with the enemy group microbes, viruses, cancer, deficient cells, sores (Appadurai, 2002:292-293) impossible. This bio-politics (Houillon, 2005:399-405) can also animalize or reify the enemy group (Sémelin, 2005; Vidal, 1996).

The biological reading of relationships between social groups generates a new political syntax (Pichot, 2002:126), and depicts society as an organic body, the survival of which requires a brain, executive members, anti-bodies, perfect internal cohesion, as well permanent activity to destruct deficient or hostile cells. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that it means advocating absolute violence (Sofsky, 1996:49), or even biological violence against these cells. Thus, the destruction of them becomes the only condition for the survival of us (Sémelin, 2005:70).

As Véronique Nahoum-Grappe suggests, a biological definition of enmity inevitably leads to undoing [the enemies] birth, in other words, to destroying them along with their ancestry and descendants (Nahoum-Grappe, 1999 and 2003). Ancestry is considered the origin and meaning of the threat (which at least partly explains the search for pure historical genealogies), and descendants are perceived as the inevitable reproduction of the source of the illness. In such a social-Darwinist perspective, everyone from our body or our species is perceived as threatened by anyone from the hostile cells or from the other species. Thus, each member of our body or our species, individually and collectively, has a moral and biological obligation to defend us as a whole.

The biological reading of relationships between social groups, which is scientifically legitimized through the school of demographic economy (Aly and Heim, 2006:81), has a further implication: it simultaneously humanizes and dehumanizes violence. Violence is humanized in the sense that it is accepted as an inherent part of human nature, which defines every human species (man is a wolf to man). Heinrich Himmler was quite clear when he explained that the only way to solve the social problem is for one lot to kill others and take their land. (Aly and Heim, 2006:25-26) [3] Furthermore, this principle is also considered accurate within a given species, of which only the strongest members are able to win the struggle for life.

However, this humanization of violence, even to the point of annihilation, goes hand-in-hand with the dehumanization of other groups as legitimized targets of the violence of ones own group (Burgat, 1999). As Zygmunt Bauman put it, in fact, a human being can only exercise violence at the cost of dehumanizing others and considering alterity between social groups as a sign of enmity: Once effectively dehumanized, and hence canceled as potential subjects of moral demands, human objects of bureaucratic task-performance are viewed with ethical indifference, which soon turns into disapprobation and censure when their resistance, or lack of cooperation, slows down the smooth flow of bureaucratic routine. Dehumanized objects cannot possibly possess a cause, much less a just one; they have no interests to be considered, indeed no claim to subjectivity. Human objects become therefore a nuisance factor. (Baumann, 2002:129)
From Biological Discourse to Biological Violence

The biological discourse of enmity is not autonomous or self-sufficient. In fact, the degree of complementarity between social-Darwinist categories and the religious-eschatological categories of good and evil can be rather impressive. [4] These categories are conceived as bearing incompatible and unchangeable sets of values and atavistic traits (civilization and barbarity, progress and regression, frankness and secrecy, beauty and ugliness) that differentiate two groups as collective entities, and their individual members, in a moral and physical sense (Traverso, 2003:156). This radical opposition continues with yet another distinction: the we group is considered the subject of History (it has a historical and universal mission to accomplish), as well as the subject of its own history (reaching collective wealth, happiness and emancipation), whereas the enemy group is simply apprehended as an object. It does not have its own dynamics or vitality, and is not possessed of any historical mission other than negative and destructive ones. The enemy group can only act through inhuman and therefore brutal force (or inhuman weakness), an inhuman sense of treachery and non-human virility, which in this case is radically different from either the struggle for life or libido. Oppression and destruction appear to be the only dynamics that give life to the group designated as an enemy, and its only motivation in the struggle for life. This explanation was widely used during and after the genocide of the Armenians, and also in order to justify the genocides of the Jews and the Tutsis.

Accordingly, a war to annihilate this enemy, relying almost exclusively on brutality and treachery, is not seen as wrong: it is construed as a necessity for the groups own sake and for humanity as a whole, and a means for the we-group to accomplish its universal, metaphysical mission. However, in some cases, such a war requires the we group to use a sort of counter-barbarity, against its enemies barbarity. This counter-barbarity is not synonymous of a regression or contradictory of its protagonists civility; instead, it is a moral obligation. The moral responsibility for this act of extermination rests with the exterminated group itself, in the sense that it forced us to behave as we did. Thus, this extermination becomes the last crime of the enemy group.

Moreover, the process of counter-barbarity must be perceived as legal, and must include extremely sophisticated judiciary procedures. The mass murders and extermination should not only be scientifically explained and morally legitimized; they must also be lawful, and become legally constructed acts and policies. In the Ottoman Empire, the deportation of the Armenians, a prelude to their extermination, was made lawful through legislation, and yet another legal act forbade their conversion to Islam from 1915 to 1918. In Nazi Germany, all acts of discrimination against the Jews were legally founded (but the legal information and decisions concerning the extermination itself were known only to a few high-ranking decision-makers). In Cambodia, members of the opposition (or suspected opponents) often had to accept the vocabulary of the authorities i.e. the legitimacy of the categories constructed by the powers that be in their own confessions and testimony, before their executions could legally be carried out [5]. In essence, these laws prove that the we group remain attached to their civilized norms and way of life. As Marc Ruthemonds latest film on Sophia Scholl showed, they are also a written explanation, argumentation and legitimization. The law is a means to enshrine what is "natural" or "scientific" (struggle for life, violence as a part of human nature, treacherous cells...) as a legal truth, and make it a supreme source of legislation and of the judicial framework of society. Through the legalization of extermination, the biological categories used to express enmity (Untermenchen, treachery, betrayal) become obligatory for everyone. [6]

Criminalization of Political Opposition

Ethnic and religious groups are not the only ones to have been transformed into enemies through the use of
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biological categories. In some cases, social and political groups are also apprehended in ethnic, or even in racial terms. In the 19th century, the legal-anthropological school of Cesare Lombroso popularized the idea of biological differences among human beings. According to Lombroso, these differences meant that some human beings were predestined to lives of criminality and prostitution (Chevalier, 1958; Wagniart, 1999). As Enzo Traverso suggested, at the end of the 19th century, in many parts of Europe the lower classes were considered inferior races (Traverso, 2003:119-131). Although these constructions were biologically founded, they were not conceived in order to destroy the groups designated as enemies of a given social order.

The definition of some political and social groups as social and biological enemies and threats to be exterminated en masse, only occurred after the First World War, and in the framework of revolutionary experiments. A collection of quotations of Lenin, analyzed by Wladimir Berelovitch, indicates that the leader of the Soviet revolution saw no difference between political opponents and biological threats (Zarzoubine, 1990). Zarzoubine's impressive novel, The Tchekist (Zarzoubine, 1990), showed that as early as the beginning of the 1920s, political enemies and particularly traitors were seen as a quasi-ethnic group and as such, they were designated for destruction. In the 1930s, the Kulaks, who had been massively exterminated, were virtually defined as an oppressive ethnic-class. Finally, in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the families of political opponents and much more frequently, of individuals accused of being opponents, were also considered enemies, as Rithy Panhs documentary film S-21 demonstrates.

**Bibliography**


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[1] The concept of symbolic violence is used here as a type of violence which designates and categorizes a group as the natural and legitimate target of physical coercion and, in some cases, of an annihilation policy.
Schmitt joined the Nazi party in the 1930s and defended the idea that the Jews were impure, considered a degenerate element within German society and a threat to the Aryan race and law (Zarka, 2003:161-164).

Hermann Goering remarked: This year, 20 to 30 million people will starve in Russia. Perhaps this is for the best, since certain nations must be decimated, quoted in Aly & Heim 2006: 267.

In contradiction with the scientific claims of social Darwinism, the struggle between us and them is often explained on a mystical and metaphysical level. Thus, the battle is presented as taking place between the we-group, that represents positive values which have remained unchanged throughout history, and the non-human them, which has preserved the negative values inherent to their race. The real meaning of violence against them (or their violence against us) should not be sought in the concrete place and time-frame in which it occurs, but rather in this a-historical explanation. However, in contrast to past battles, the battle which takes place here and now is the one which will end this eternal, worldwide plot, and through which the we-group will achieve its eschatological emancipation.

However, the genocide of the Tutsis is an exception to this rule, in the sense that it took place at the same time as a sort of coup d’Etat, which gave the radical Hutu factions in the State apparatus total autonomy.

Today, more than nine decades later, the Turkish State still wants to transform the category of betrayal into a legally and universally pertinent argument legitimizing the Armenians deportation. Moreover, it demands that the Armenians themselves accept these categories and consequently, that they acknowledge their treachery and admit that they were responsible for their fate.