

TACTICAL HUMANISM

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THE CRISIS OF NAMES

We sense that something happened on September 11, 2001 which required our intuitions of crisis, emergency and rupture to help us. We needed to know what to call the world into which we entered on that date. Since that date, many terms and names have rushed in to answer this call. Terror is one of many of these names. Civilization is another of them. And everywhere moral visions call for humanity to find names for its other .

The crisis of names and naming requires a response. Many of those who oppose the violence of September 11 are equally horrified by the violence of the U.S. and British response. Samuel Huntington's model of "The Clash of Civilizations" seems to have come even truer than he might have feared.

Yet this is not a clash of civilizations and this name will serve us badly . The reasons for this have been noted by many thinkers: the Muslim world is not unified. Al-Qaeda is as much opposed to many Arab regimes as it is to the United States. The Koran contains no mandate for generalized violence against civilians. Tolerance has always been abused by religions at war with each other.

Yet, we all feel that this is a war of words and worlds. In my opinion this is a deep war, not a shallow one. That is, it is war about a crisis that transcends its stated motives and even the nature of the particular actors and countries involved. It is a war about the future of the nation-state as a locus of civility, sovereignty, moral authority and as a monopolist of legitimate violence. The attack on the World Trade Towers was an act of war performed on a gigantic scale by unseen and unknown actors. It named an enemy without naming a country as its author. In one stroke it inaugurated what we may call the Age of the Authorless War. Such a war moves us beyond the question of just and unjust wars to an age of wars without the familiar maps of territory, sovereignty, borders and national interests. It is the military incarnation of the global financial economy, a borderless war, with ephemeral winners and losers, technically terrifying but not fully contained by traditional reasons or boundaries. Even more than the terrifying atomic

assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the attack on the World Trade Towers was not merely an effort to kill civilians. It was an effort to end the idea of civilians.

The U.S. response in regard to bombing Afghanistan (with the early bonus feature of dropping food packages) showed a new ambivalence between recognizing that the era of civilians was over and holding on to the idea that there were human tragedies to be somehow compensated.

DIAGNOSTIC WARS

I have elsewhere argued that globalization has spawned special forms of uncertainty about group identity, which create new kinds of group violence in the name of ethnicity. In the large-scale ethnic wars of the 1980's and 1990's, cross-border movements of refugees, implosions of nationalist politics, fears of economic chaos and rumors of tyrannical autochtonies have produced large-scale ethnic violence involving extreme forms of bodily brutality. I have argued that such forms of violence are macabre forms of vivisectionist discovery, intended to "discover" and uncover true identities behind false facades. These are monstrous versions of the methods of science.

In the terrifying attack on the World Trade Center and in the continuing battering of the valleys, cities and caves of Afghanistan by the U. S. led Alliance we see a state-led extension of these forms of vivisectionist violence which we may call "diagnostic wars". A diagnostic war is a war in which major acts of violence are intended to both discover and decimate the enemy. They are part of a world in which violence is not about a known enemy but is an effort to find the enemy.

In the wake of September 11, we have entered a world of diagnostic procedures, not just in the bombings and suicide attacks that continue, but also in the response of security states everywhere, which seek to document, classify, isolate and discover terrorists in their midst through various forms of violently invasive and randomized behavior. The hunt for beards, names, accents etc is a pathetic and frightening index of the era of diagnostic wars and somatic inquisitions. We have entered a world where every face could be a mask. In this sense too, we may mourn the death of the civilian, if by civilians we mean persons who assume that their ordinary appearances are enough to assure that they are not seen as traitors or as enemies. Since almost no one, especially in the warring countries, is immune from the suspicion that they may be the enemy (whether or not they are terrorists), we can see why we experience new forms of anxiety in many parts of the world. It is no longer a world in which enemies produce

wars, but one in which wars determine and diagnose enemies. Pakistan, for example, was forced to become an ally through diagnostic pressure. This is why the idea of a just war seems somewhat beside the point, since that debate presumes a routine causal link between reasons of state, enmity and acts of war.

The War of World Systems

This is not a clash of civilizations but it is certainly a clash of world systems. I suggest that the best way to understand this clash is to contrast the “vertebrate” world with the “cellular” world. The vertebrate world is the world of the nation-state defined in more or less realist terms. Also parts of this vertebrate world are the global, multinational corporations, which may and do cross frontiers and blur loyalties but still function substantially by co-opting, invading, leveraging or corrupting existing state forms. The capitalism which underwrites globalization is resolutely vertebrate insofar as its main actors, procedures and interests have clear links through various centralized structures, ranging from the United Nations and the Bretton-Woods institutions, to the WTO, GATT and other newer multilateral governance institutions which aim to coordinate and control capital on a global basis in some synchrony (however contradictory) with the sovereignty of existing nation-states.

The cellular (or invertebrate) world is not just a world of flows and networks but also works through completely different forms of coordination and coherence. It functions by multiplication, isolation of functional units, action by imitation or sympathy rather than by command, and it relies on the infinite reproducibility of certain minimal principles, whether ideological or functional. The networks behind the attacks on the WTC (whether they are confined to Al-Qaeda or not) are excellent examples of this cellularity.

But we would be mistaken to assume that such cellularity is solely a feature of covert networks devoted to guerilla terror. Cellularity is also a key aspect of many anti-globalization movements, which function in very similar ways across national boundaries. Behind the high spirits of the anti-globalization dramas of Seattle, Prague, Washington, Milan etc. is a great diversity of cellular organizations, connected by e-mail, dispersed financial assets, non-governmental sources of legitimacy and para-statal forms of communication and control. So-called global civil society thus often takes cellular form.

In some regards, the more mysterious parts of the corporate world, those that rely on quasi-criminal channels and resources, non-taxable off-shore havens, unofficial

methods of money-transfer and large transactions based on personal ties rather than on official records, also have this cellular quality. The space where these corporate mechanisms meet the world of terrorist networks, to take just one example, is the mechanism of “hawala” payments, a venerable way of transferring money without actually moving either money tokens or currencies, across large distances. Hawala financing is surely a big part of the terrorist world but it is also a big part of the gray world of finance and commerce in the era of globalization more generally.

In short, the clash we are witnessing is between the entire system of global governance informed by the principles of national sovereignty and international law, generated after the Treaty of Westphalia, and a newer world of global flows, alliances, allegiances, and mobilization which is cellular but also entirely global. In this sense, the technologies of cellular globalization (such as e-mail, open borders, visas for expert forms of labor, new forms of globally portable software, and highly transferable forms of wealth such as derivatives) constitute a virtually unbeatable threat to the nation-state as a classic envelope for sovereignty, territory and legitimate authority.

In an earlier period of industrial capitalism, there seemed to be neater division of labor between ruling classes, states and global capitalism. This relationship is now faced with myriad contradictions, including those between the “vertebrate” and the “cellular” dimensions of capital itself. Put another way, always ridden with contradictions, capitalism is now itself divided into its cellular dimension, which relies on stealth, criminality and cross-border mobility and its vertebrate dimension, which still relies on state protection, bureaucratic instruments and nationally defined markets.

Many observers have stated their arguments and intuitions about the link between the attacks of September 9 and the general trend towards greater rage and frustration among the poorer regions and classes of the world, the world of the losers in the great game of globalization, especially after 1989. And yet many of these observers have also mentioned that the causal links between global dispossession and rage against the u.s. and its global allies in the world of capital are neither simple nor straightforward.

My own suggestion would be that the violence of September 11 and the world-wide reshuffling of Alliances that we have seen since then, is part of a more foundational struggle between cellular and vertebrate forms of globalization, in which the cellular forms have succeeded better, for the moment, in capturing the fear and rage about the United States that has long been active in most parts of the Southern world. The Islamic world is an excellent example of the relationship between indigenous tyrannies, excluded majorities, the U.S. presence and the frustrations of new kinds of Arab intelligentsia. But this formula could easily work in many other places, which is

why the equation of terror with Islam and of Islam with the Arab world alone, will not take us very far. As for the United States, it may be noted that the intense hatred of this country in many parts of the world seems to be related to its double personality: as the monopolist of dreams of the good life and as the perceived gate-keeper responsible for excluding many peoples and classes from access to this very good life, either by limiting immigration or by enforcing specific ideas of market, politics and development on poorer countries.

TACTICAL HUMANISM

Even if we are careful not to avoid the self-appointed apocalypticism of many experts in the media, the state machineries and in public life in the West, that accompanied the events of September 11, (that is, the tendency to see the world as having changed for ever because a major American building complex was demolished), we cannot but recognize that the new millennium, promised in the form of the chaos of Y2K appeared by stealth as 9-11.

And surely values are part of the carnage of the battles that have taken place since then, especially among the cities and mountains of Afghanistan. But how to think about this slaughterhouse of values, iconized by the statues of Bamiyan at one end and the imploded World Trade Center buildings at the other?

The image of clash seems too weak because there are so many clashes and the fault-line of civilizations is patently both simple and dangerous to describe these. The image of "twilight" is perhaps better, if nothing else because it speaks of an eerie epistemological stress. The image of hybridization seems weakest of all, not because it doesn't describe some of what is going on but because it is insufficiently specific and thus insufficiently comforting. Yes, we are seeing new secularisms arise in response to new fundamentalisms and hybrid deployments of the image of terror, and also hybrid mixes of allies both for and against the attacks of September 7. New debates have come into view within the world of Islam as well as new debates about war and justice in different traditions. There has been much exchange between intellectuals and critics across borders (in hostile spaces such as India and Pakistan for example). In all these ways the inevitable work of hybridization goes on, powered by the technologies of global flow and flux.

I have already suggested that this is a clash between two kinds of globalized world systems, one cellular and one vertebrate. But what sort of values can guide us through this struggle, which has barely begun and has caught us largely unprepared?

We know that simple manicheisms will not do. And nor will a liberal faith that hybridization will always bring the best values to the fore. Even if this may be true in the long run, it is poor comfort in a world of emergency.

What is called for is some sort of tactical humanism, a humanism which is prepared to see universals as asymptotically approached goals, subject to endless negotiation, not based on prior axioms. This is not a recommendation in disguise for relativism, for tactical humanism does not believe in the equal claims of all possible moral worlds. It believes in producing values out of engaged debate, even while bombs fall and treason is a charge thrown around freely by the voices of an antique nationalism.

Such tactical humanism will need to recognize that we cannot rely any more on the moral certainties of the nation; that we have entered a period when the right to be civilian may have to be painstakingly rebuilt; that for the foreseeable future cellular networks may outpace other forms of global governmentality; and that we may see more diagnostic wars which seek the enemy, and their own justice, post-factum. In such a world, we may need to cease to take universals for granted and begin to practice the art of constructing them one emergency at a time. This is a hard prospect but perhaps our best one: a humanism prepared to negotiate across borders unaccompanied by any non- negotiable universals.