On the Victim's Side: A Note on Humanitarianism in the Time of Wars of Interference

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Introduction

Between astonishment and horror: with these feelings we are forced to live, rather impotently, in the time of preventive war – a time marked by the daily barbarism of never-ending conflicts, ravaged by suicide bombings as well as by places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Astonishment and horror, for example, affected international reactions to the slaughter in Moscow's theatre in October 2002, before re-imposing themselves, two years later, upon all those who witnessed the tragic kidnapping of the Beslan school children. There, among those corpses, political theorists should have discerned a rather definitive picture of the crisis the very idea of State had fallen into, as a subject no longer able to distinguish between friends and enemies, between innocent civilians and 'terrorists'. The Chechen conflict, anyhow, can be ordinarily placed within the context of *permanent war*, where the sequences of astonishment and horror have exceeded any political limit leaving no space for remembrance. Thus, the bodies of terrorists 'gassed' by a cocktail of vasodilatives and sarin, those ones hidden in body-bags of the civilians 'who did not make it', as well as the over-exposed and unlookable children laid out in a line along the walls of their school in Dagestan, were quickly neutralised and forgotten, just as much for the investigations that should have taken place to discover the causes and reasons for those deaths, foreseen or not, wanted or not. The message was rather clear: we were dealing with the umpteenth front of an endless 'conflict' where borders are no longer recognised.

In the name of security, and of preventive war, even the distinction between civilians and terrorists (a real *finis terrae* in the rhetoric of post 11th September, 2001) ends up with assuming an absolute uncertainty. Naturally, it was Putin's own idea of security, whose elements of 'breakdown' were actually the paradoxical direction and the total dimension he has conferred to it. Yet, if the target is 'new' (as it could be new something that brings Russia backwards, annulling time), the sense is not at all, by reproducing within the borders of national territory, what has been nowadays extended

on a worldwide level by the doctrine of preventive war. The difference between the sacrifice of a few civilians to hit 'terrorists' and the striking of whole populations through bombings and a crossfire which is always enemy, in order to punish the 'terrorist' states to which the 'terrorists' belong, is a thin red line, actually non-existent. It alludes, on the one hand, to life's formal status being overturned, and, on the other, where it never really existed. And from nothing comes to light a figure, in the form of a shallow continuum that accompanies 'actual wars', floating between an often redundant mass media picture and an absolute inconsistent political recognition of the victim.

My intention in these notes is to question the condition, as immediate as undepicted and withheld, of victims. Today 'victim' is a category encountered anywhere and everywhere: from the extreme of genocides (often exaggerated, risking trivialising in comparisons not only the word but also the persons involved) to mass deportation, from the chronic situation of starved people, to the banality of the evil of abuse and oppression, to passive smoking. But behind all the apparent self-evidence, behind a self-explanatory definition, what is at stake when we speak of victims? The impression is that in such a wide semantic field there is a deception, or better still a trap. We deal with a category, at the best juridical, but highly moral, and as such essentially unpolitical, or rather meta-political, if we followed *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith.

Does the word 'victim' adequately characterize subjects whose condition is nearly always political, but whose status remains as such undiscovered? Might we inquire another category, of *excess*, which, however placed at the extremes of every moral category, is, in any case, immediate? Might we begin with a completely political distinction, which concerns the abstract capacity of 'voice'? Here, there are victims who speak, who define themselves as such (and therefore 'act', thus realising a process of victimisation), there, there are victims who have no voice and are defined as such by others. Victims there, those inclusively registered as victims, would be subjects who, as Gayatry Spivak suggests, are nearly always 'geopolitically located'. From the masses barely escaping wars and hunger, to the lifeless corpses of civilians sacrificed by Putin. From the Afghan, Kosovar, Serb or Palestinian civilians, accidentally hit, or having themselves mistaken a fragment bomb for humanitarian aid, to the migrants, shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, dead in the Southern California sun. Subjects definitively placed outside the borders of nation states, subjects beyond the citizen, whose life and death, irrelevant, are not counted and do not count, subjects whose death, when impending, is an unavoidable accident, technically, listed in the obscene lexicon of *warfare management* as 'collateral damage'.

The euphemistic formula 'collateral damage', an incurable inference to the same *inexorable* victims of all modern wars, is a symptom betraying the actual 'idea of humanity', which also has acted as a constant and implicit condition of armed intervention running, in recent years, from Somalia and the Kosovo 'saved' by a humanitarian intervention, to Afghanistan and Iraq, 'shocked and awed'. The impression of a line, a continuity settled by contextualizing the present, setting itself as a hypothetical threshold in relation to times that passed before – times when wars seemed to have been reduced to progressive figures of humanitarian intervention operations, when all seemed to point to *openness,* towards *enlargement*, providing the best conditions for market *operativity.*

If we free ourselves of the interpretation of preventive wars as exclusively legitimised by terrorist threat, we discover the plot of an 'order' (here the inverted commas are obligatory) which has been constitutively crossed by conflicts, at least since 1991, the year of the first Iraqi crusade.[1] An 'order', which has given war back the fulcrum that bipolar stagnation seemed to have subdued – but actually only having placed it away, far from the West[2] – making it act, far from any exceptionalist literature, as an authentic condition of possibility. If not the main regulator of a completely globalised capitalism, which, in order to maintain the imbalances it reproduces, can resort only to force.[3] This, among other things, allows the turning of every attempt to represent the present of war as an absolute contextual moment, a temporary obstacle in the linear process of the constitution of a global area which could be crossed and potentially smoothed, lacking any attrition and external appearance.

On the contrary, I believe that only by assuming the central, constituent role played by war does it become possible to understand the form of *exteriority*, sidereal and absolute, that this 'order' continuously produces and demands as an inflexible and constant residual – its own excess. Behind a presence which seems to overthrow time and the very idea of space which came immediately before it, it is possible to discover a rather continuous line that damages any form of linear and direct reading of the process of 'imperial' constitution – as well as permanent war which seems to have thrown the plot into confusion. A line that can act either horizontally (operating, as suggested by Alain Joxe, from law and order and zero-tolerance policies to the theological clash of civilisation[4]), or vertically (on the escalation links up the first Gulf war to the last), finding in the politics of security its actual point of no return. In the following pages I will try to re-discover the meaning of such a continuity, focusing on a seemingly secondary passage, retraceable in the outcomes of the interference wars of the last ten years, and easily deduced from the general *indifference* towards social, political and material effects on the populations affected. It is obvious, immediately evident, that such an attitude cannot be blamed on only present wars. The proportions reached today, however, tend to grant them a certain *symptomatic* characteristic, directly verifiable in the way wars are conducted (the concentrated use of aviation, accidental casualties because 'indistinguishable', humanitarian aid confused with bombs), in the immediate consequences provoked on the areas affected (forced displacement, environmental destruction), in the ways civil populations are governed (the militarization of aid programmes, the mass-identification of civilians), and furthermore, in the non-stop creation of refugees and internally displaced, in a state of war which is prolonged well beyond the end of military operations, and of a daily, normal, 'natural' death.

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1   For a synthetic picture, see Dal Lago (2003).

2   Trying to enquire into the accountability of conflicts and victims during the Cold War, it was discovered how such stagnation was the objective effect of endemic instability and conflict and only slightly 'visible'. For an analysis of the 'Post-colonial wars' in the Cold War, see Mazower (1998).

3   Anyway, the very outcome of the recent Cancun conference, where Europe and the USA have imposed free trade on whole areas of the planet, yet demanding recognition for protection zones in commercial trade where they are directly affected, openly demonstrates how this 'equilibrium' can only be maintained by a permanent state of war.

4   See Joxe (2003).

Humanity, Excess

Well, it is actually from these passages, retraceable as a *continuum* in every point of war, that stems a humanity which wars simultaneously over expose and constrain. A side product of recent interventionist wars, 'humanity' emerges in its fullest political meaning as their 'excess'. It is for this reason that such wars can be seen even as devices, *dispositifs* of *control* on a (sub)humanity that humanity proper will have presupposed. We are dealing with a hypothesis further strengthened by the type of 'order' that follows the *aftermath* of military operations: an order located in the form of 'protectorates' via the deployment of numerous international troops, which, in turn, close the borders and intern whole populations, blocking any access to other countries for possible exile[5]; a purely ethnic order, constantly under fire from 'low intensity' conflicts. From the Somalia left to itself after the failure of the 'Restore Hope' operation, to the mono-ethnic Kosovo still populated by persecuted minorities (whose presence 'justifies' the imposition of international protectorate under resolution 1244 of the United Nations), to the Afghanistan torn apart in post-war, not to mention Iraq, where 'post-war' (here a rather absurd term) causes more victims than the war itself: in all these cases the first impression is of something incomparable to the most meagre notion of order.

The question to pose is therefore quite direct: how to compare such a structure of excess with the concept of security, a key-word of present day wars? The points shown above would demonstrate, instead, an image that is miles away from the proclamations of *law and order* which followed the bombs over Belgrade, Kabul and Baghdad. On this subject, many voices have denounced the 'superficiality' of the American *establishment* in its management of military operations, especially in the post-war in Afghanistan and Iraq: the complete ignorance of the actual political, social, cultural and 'human' situations of these countries, from which it would be possible to ascertain a certain racist attitude.[6] Similar 'errors' could be charged to the military and political management of the humanitarian war in Kosovo – errors well-evident in the 'serial' accidents of casualties, as well as in the escalation of the refugee emergency during the bombings and in the actual conditions of the minorities. All the mentioned instances (and Somalia should act as a paramount example, in this case), are evidence of a pure racism: the colonial or rather 'orientalist' racism characterising the unilateral American or Western hegemony, built upon coarse, stylised, all-encompassing categories (the 'Arabs', 'Islam', the 'West'), thus producing a polarised and dichotomous map, *à la* Huntington. But there is more. Insofar as racism, from colonialism onwards, is unthinkable as a 'simple' cultural fact, and is rather a geo-political rapport which itself produces a geography and supports itself on the weft of irrefutable borders. In other words, I do not believe we can look at the contradictory outcomes and mistakes that run through three conflicts, linked though they are by the generic principle of inter(sovra)national interference, as simple accidents, or what Weber would have defined as instances of a generic 'heterogenesis of means'. On the contrary: in order to

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5   It is on the basis of an international *in loco* presence that it is possible to refuse or not permit refugees
     from other countries, avoiding the principle of *non refoulement* stipulated by the International Statute
     for refugees 1951. Please refer to Cohen and Deng (1998).

6   See, for example, Said (2003); Dal Lago (2003).

discover a systematic nature in the production of victims and disorder, which is found in the unwillingness and indifference of a politics of security, we would have to bring them back to the specific dimension of the border to which they respond.

This brings to the fore the reasons of the politics of security, whose concept, as a central theme of modern politics, can be traced back to the Hobbesian construction of the State. Today, talking about security means being able to measure oneself with the unrelenting turnover the term has undergone in the last four decades, shifting from a declension looking inwards, formed to give assurances and a material sense to the word 'inclusion', towards a projection looking outwards, as a set of devices of *law enforcement*, an ever growing control of exclusive borders.[7] It is this action 'on frontiers' that implies a renewed 'bio-political' meaning of the notion of security, insisting on the threatened and increasingly indistinct line separating those areas where people's lives are governed and 'left to live', from an outside at which they are abandoned to themselves and 'left to die'.[8]

The idea of border and the decisive role security plays in it, was a topic addressed by Michel Foucault at the *Collège de France* in 1978. Dedicated to *Sécurité, territoire, population*, long unpublished, apart from the famous lecture on the concept of 'governmentality'.[9] Its main issue was the gradual political investment in security, which marked the transition to modernity. Foucault traced such a process to the interlacing and progressive rotation of a disciplinary power with an absolute science of government, and to the innovations introduced in 18th Century France by the physiocrats. It is at this point that the concept of security really enters into the world of politics. Yet, as opposed to the discipline, which actually works on an idea of time and space regularly (pre)constituted, (a calendar, an *institution totale*), security is statistics, indicating optimum possibilities, virtual curves, and probabilities. If discipline acts through a constant surveillance and a hidden punishment, security, even forecasting specific phenomena and possible uprisings, nonetheless does not avoid and actually tends to favour them, in order ultimately to control the consequences and to ensure their possible effects. Twenty years before the works of Ulrich Beck on the risk society, and before the works of James Rosenau on the turbulence in international relations, Foucault pointed out the 'management of disorder' as the explosive nature of breakdown introduced by liberal politics of security: in short, where discipline imposes an order, security enables the control of disorder.

But how? Neither by eliminating, nor by reducing it, security moves and keeps control of the chaos it produces by managing its outcomes from a distance. And it is this distancing, the keeping of at a distance, while managing/governing it preventively and directly on site, which brings to light the specificity of *a border*, a point to which the bare lives of civilians could be led back, where the bodies of the victims of the 'new wars' belong. It is an effectively political border, which appears somewhat more definite and determinant than that which emerges in the alleged clashes of civilisation as

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7   See Dillon (1996).

8   See Foucualt (2000).

9   See Foucault (2004).

predicted by Samuel Huntington. A border that current wars exacerbate *under the sign of prevention*.

The hypothesis that needs developing, then, is that, of a space 'inhabited' by the victims, a space beyond this border (which transversally cuts slums, cities, nations, 'cultures'). A space inhabited by *surnumeraires*, who are represented only in the abstract term of an excess, whose life and death become irrelevant. The irrelevant Somali civilians tortured by the Italian 'humanitarian' troops. The irrelevant Serbs and Kosovars accidentally struck during the 'sky war' in Kosovo; the 'dark number' of victims in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the interned of Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. Elsewhere I have tried to show how this space ends up by falling into a (non)place, thus materializing the border beyond which humanity's excess should be returned, to the internment camps crowding in various forms (refugee camps, temporary camps, camps for *asylum seekers* and illegal migrants) contemporary world.[10] Here I will try to introduce some reflections about the subjects forced to live in such an uncertain space, about their impossible representation, and about the logic of confinement which rules over their existence.

On the Victim's Side

In *La souffrance à distance*, Luc Boltanski directly approached the political predicament concerning the status of victims, with the aim of providing a solid theoretical and political basis for the principle of right to interfere.[11] For Boltanski, this meant proving the intrinsic politics of a moral – the humanitarian one – necessarily located in a meta-political space, which does not yield to any partisan claim and should proclaim itself *super partes*, authentically universal. Actually, that book felt the effects of a debate (about global democracy and the primacy of human rights) and a subject (the predictive idea of a 'global civil society') which seems to be quite distant nowadays, overcome as they are by the unilateral logic of preventive war. The superficial character of such a breakdown has already been hinted at, in the points of continuity which do not allow the easy erasure of the *devoir d'ingerence* as an exclusive expression of the Indian summer of 'global social democracy'.

Anyhow, today's wars are represented in a specific continuity with the principle of intervention, even humanitarian, although in a rather farcical way: the liberation of Afghan women from the burkha, that one of Iraq from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein…Yet, above all, Boltanski's point appears to be still decisive in its attempt to avoid and possibly overcome the border upon which the politics of security are built, directly intervening in the chaotic space, in the 'state of nature' inhabited by the victims.

The increasingly marked presence of non-institutional and NGO players on the international stage is undoubtedly an immediate and distinctive feature of the 'global' present: trans-national subjects active in aiding victims of 'humanitarian' disasters, in

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10 See Rahola (2003).

11 See Boltanski (1994).

reconstructing areas devastated by conflicts, or co-operating internationally. Trans-national subjects who often declare their desire not to accept the 'pincers of inequality and injustice of the modern world', and, by doing so – according to Boltanski – make a decisive move to action, transforming aporethic positions into an absolute form of *agency*. Trans-national subjects whose actions are often based on superimposed attitudes, deriving from heterogeneous and generally incompatible assumptions, which Boltanski refers to as 'topic of accusation', of 'sentiment' and an 'aesthetic topic'. Long-distance support, voluntary agency and direct action *in loco* would allow covering the 'hiatus of experience', would enable the impotence of those watching the 'spectacle of pain' from distance. It would also answer in a pragmatic and prompt way to the need to act without delegating or limiting one's own action to a written accusation, to an indefinite pity or a simple narcissistic statement – all experiences that would either fall on the subject itself or be easily instrumentalized.

I don't want to directly contest the immediate effects and the generally undeferrable need of the role played by different humanitarian agencies. Rather, my point concerns the opportunity to assert an alleged (impolitical or apolitical) *super partes* position as the basic assumption for every humanitarian issue. Boltanski's response, articulated in the final pages of the book, does not appear to leave any doubts: against all 'political' criticism of humanitarianism, the logic of direct intervention represents a real universal principle; and as far as it is concerned, such a universal dimension can superimpose any kind of political instances and accusations, by the fact of eluding any partisan, 'communitarian and Jacobin' logic. An unchallengeable universality is, as such, based upon a specific *super partes* position which Boltanski deduces in a simple gesture from two of the top theorists of *devoir d'ingerence*: that of 'being on the victims' side'.[12] As 'ontologically universal' and immediately recognisable figures, the victims as such thus legitimise the universality of humanitarian logic.

Now, it is evident to Boltanski that such universality cannot be assumed as an absolute, in that it actually depends deeply on media intervention: it cannot suggest itself, but it must be constructed.[13] From this starting point, it is possible to formulate two objections to Boltanski's point, alongside with a more general one, which challenges the position and particularly the subject/object relation over which he reconstructs a phenomenology of the humanitarian moral. The first objection concerns the particular '*super partes*' position that is assumed to be decisive for claims about the universal right to intervention; the second objection involves the particular universality of the victims, or rather some of the political effects that their depoliticised representation as such might provoke.

By affirming the absolute impartiality and therefore non-political attitude of the interventions of many NGOs, apart from belittling the political demands of the same NGOs, Boltanski seems to underestimate (and implicitly absolve) the plot of the complex superimposition in which the new 'global' players work. In particular, he seems to avoid the progressive symbiosis that highlights the relationship between NGOs

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12 See Bettati and Koucher (1987).

13 Rather than defining such universality as *a priori*, it seems more correct to accept it as a process, as 'universalisation'. On this point see Žižek (1999: 228).

and political institutions, reciprocally implied for humanitarian-political and especially civilian-military aid operations. Michael Dillon and Julian Reid call this symbiosis the "contemporary politicisation/militarization of the humanitarian and the humanisation of the military".[14] Nowadays, several NGOs appear to act in a sort of mimesis of the politician (behaving like institutional players, members speaking like official spokesmen, managed and directed by ex-politicians and diplomats). It is a symptom of a real empowerment, whose paradigmatic evidence can be found in a figure like Bernard Kouchner, former president of *Medecins sans Frontiérès* and then director of the United Nations'.[15] According to Dillon and Reid, "nowadays many humanitarian organisations and NGOs have been recluted into those structures and centres of power, an essentially political project, against which they have been founded and politically defined."[16]

Likewise evident is the parallel process of the 'humanitarianisation' of the military. In place of the myth of the good soldier has come the do-good soldier. All recruiting campaigns for national forces trust in advertisements showing soldiers rescuing victims, handing out clothing and aid, holding children. Ethicality is transformed into colourless formulae (*peace-keeping*, *peace-enforcing,* intervention force and international mediation) or into abstruse logos – 'Peace Support Operations' (PSO), 'Operations other than War' (OOTW). This obfuscates the latest sense of this deferment, which is the constant use of armies for the 'humanitarian' management of civilian populations – a deferment whose *escalation* began with the Blue Helmets of the United Nations, moved on to the NATO troops, and to the American, British, Italian and Polish contingents stationed in Iraq. We can recognize the instance of Kosovo, where the humanitarian emergency 'resulting' from the war which provoked the flight of over eight thousand refugees into enormous camps in Macedonia and Albania, was passed from the UN to NATO. But the following wars, which can be considered even as 'simple' military occupations, by far exceed that specific situation. Their consequences seem far more complex than those foreseen by the enlightening introduction of international rules about interaction between the military and civilians.[17] They essentially concern the role of military power, the undefined range of its action, the ambivalent and therefore almost unlimited domain conferred to it by security policies.[18]

The 'perverse' effects of this symbiosis, anyway, tend to be quite paradoxical: there is a frequent use of private security companies, who are subcontracted to execute the specific 'humanitarian' tasks. An example of this is the case of an NGO in Sierra Leone which recruits local militia for the distribution of aid in the refugee camps.[19] Moreover,

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14 Dillan and Reid (2000).

15 Such political objection, there is a more prosaic or material sum, linked to the fact that today many NGOs spend more resources on mass media awareness campaigns and *fund raising* than on direct aid programmes. For this see the special edition of *Que choisir* on '*Aide humanitaire*', 46, 2000.

16 Dillon and Reid (2000: 121).

17 There is a fair amount of literature which attempts to 'humanitarianally' define and optimise the interaction military and civilian powers and especially between military forces and civilian populations in the areas of 'humanitarian' intervention. See, for example, Weiss (1999).

18 Apart from Dal Lago (2003), see also Bigo (2000).

19 See on this matter the essay by Hendri (1997), who offers a critique which is far from the scenario made by Boltanski, highlighting not only the frequent collusion between military and civilian players, politicians and humanitarians, national and international, but also the contradictions and

such a close relationship collapses under the utter uncertainty of international *networks – a context in which* any distinction between military and civilian, political and humanitarian, public and private, becomes impossible. Public and private security (military) who at the same time sell arms and 'security means' in order to demilitarise political crisis; financial analysts and consultants of cooperation aid specialised in security and *warfare techniques*.[20] The list could go on, and would inevitably lead us to Iraq today, where alleged *bodyguards*, soldiers and humanitarian operators work side by side, often carrying out the same duties and tasks.

This, among other things, helps to restore a decidedly unclear picture of humanitarianism, which is light years away from the claims of impartiality and universalism referred to by Boltanski, and quite close in its immediate output to the logic of security and control. The logics of such an overlapping are rather explicit, if not institutionalised: I have already mentioned how it is possible to refuse asylum to individuals in flight, even from situations of persecution and actual risk, if there is already an existing humanitarian aid programme located in their country of origin. It occurs today in Kosovo (where the presence of *UNHCR* and numerous NGOs prevents the recognition of potential refugees among the non-Albanian minorities), and in south Afghanistan (due to the 'humanitarian corridors' set up along the border with Pakistan, which definitively constrains the people to that zone). It also happened in Srebrenica, at the height of the war that tore asunder the (ex-)Yugoslavia, and in North Iraq, with the 'Safe Havens' set by a UN resolution in 1991 that are still in force today.

Privatisation of aid operations, collusion between military and humanitarian organisations, direct control and coercive territorialisation: all this seems to be the distopical materialisation of the 'globalist' dream of a *super partes* supranational subject. Whether institutional or inscribed in an indefinite global civil society, a *super partes* today appears more realistically to be a carte-blanche proxy that given to NGOs and private groups by the UN and UNHCR. In this perspective, humanitarianism betrays a die-hard, to a certain extent 'structural', implication in the *political* situations where it intervenes, demonstrating a 'redemptive' presence, which is rarely opposing and is nearly always linear to the moral legitimisation of quite often illegitimate armed interventions. The 'missionary' logic it reproduces responds more to that logic which undergrids wars of intervention. In both cases there is a clear shift from a political realm into a moral one, where the enemy is no longer recognised as such, and any political consideration is ethically reformulated in terms of the Good (the do-good soldier and the brave volunteers) against the Evil (the 'enemies of humanity' and the suffering that can be soothed but never eradicated). In other words, from a political axis based on the contradictions equality/differences or friend/enemy, the issue has progressively shifted into a moral one of right and wrong, into the spectacle of good against evil, thus reproducing *in toto* the theological climate of preventive war.

Boltanski's idea seems to avoid these objections, or, rather, he gives the impression of being aware of them, but looking elsewhere. His point is that it is always possible to

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embarrassment many humanitarian subjects feel when direct or indirect claims on made on behalf of the victims.

20 See Duffield (1998: 66).

represent the reasons and the moral 'duty' to intervene as authentically *super partes,* by precisely returning to the universal figure of the victim. For him, the right of intervention indeed originates in the undeferrable need to 'intervene' on behalf of the supposedly universal figure of the victim. The right of intervention thus is based upon on an ethics of principles that consist in abandoning all political considerations and any thought of *laissez faire*, and instead placing oneself 'universally' on the side of the (universal) victim. This in turn implies a shift that assumes an absolute superior 'indifference' towards the victims and conversationally legitimises itself in these terms: "In front of pain, we cannot remain indifferent, or split hairs, and we choose to act by standing by those who suffer and by those under bombings".[21]

To such an apparently unchallengeable assumption, it is possible to oppose the Weberian incongruence with an ethic of principles and convictions which is focused on the field of responsibility, an ethic of principles which begins with the analysis of the immediate and practical effects that the 'right to intervene' may produce.

My objection concerns the a-priori universalism such a reasoning provides to the victims, whose figure of neutrality-naturalness appears anything but immediate and returns us inevitably to the question of mediated forms of social construction and discursive production. Particularly in the case of 'faraway' suffering, is the specific productivity/performativity of media language salient. Actually, it is only through ongoing media reproduction that it is possible to provide 'global' consistency and meaning to the 'local' figure of the victim, and to mobilise subjects who are not directly involved in the experience of suffering.

Let's be clear, this does not mean that every time victims are represented they are 'fake' and manipulated. Yet, to analyse the different ways their visibility can be constructed is important. The procedures according to which victims can be strategically presented or over-represented, and the oscillations and the specific frames used for defining and making them 'readable', actually affirm how and how much their 'universality' is a social construct. A clear-cut example of such a construction is the over-representation of the victims during the so-called 'slaughter of Timisoara'. It was a decisive step in the Romanian 'revolution' of December 1989, where local television and international *networks* had edited the same footage and added archive material in order to exaggerate the extent of the repression under Ceaucescu's dictatorship, as well as the strength of the revolt against his regime. On the other hand, as an opposed evidence, it is the absolute lack of images of the Iraqi casualties and victims during the first Gulf war, which works as a functional concealment of both the head of the Western Alliance and

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21 It is substantially this basis of behaviour, according to Boltanski, that makes it possible to overcome the contradiction of the long-distance passive spectator, by using humanitarian moral (or rather a word which in any case is action) redeems the bias and the aporethic supported by what Boltanski identifies as the three 'blunders' which lead back to the portrayal of the suffering: the 'Jacobin' accusation, the 'Christian' sentiment and the aesthetic sentiment, basically a Nietzschian derivation (see Boltanski, 2000).

the Hussein regime, which sustains international consensus for the war and obscures the course and effects of war.[22]

Examples like these, though not directly involving humanitarian players, eloquently and substantially bring us back to the basic ambiguity and easy manipulation of a figure that is presumed to be 'natural', automatically comprehensible and thereby universal. Particularly, they bring us back to the intrinsic problem of a figure, a picture that exists 'for us'. Susan Sontag reminds us of how fragile the ethical content of a picture is, and of how it therefore must be filled and strengthened by words that make it readable.[23] If the universality of victims seems often to be a direct cause of the strategies by which they are represented, an effect of the 'legends' which pass over their pictures, then their universality (as a reason for taking an interventionist position and as a reason for affirming the right to do so) ought not to be taken for granted. The assertion might sound problematic insofar as it seems to link extreme situations, where suffering is out of the question, only with specific strategies of representation. However, at the very heart of claims to the right to intervention, the universality of victims seems rather to concern their 'ontological' condition, their being innocent subjects whose unreasonable and intolerable sacrifice is often counterbalanced by the impunity of those 'truly responsible'. This universality, arguably, at least for those intending to 'do something', *goes well beyond and against any form of representation.*

An example from the Kosovo war helps us to grasp a deep ambiguity that in similar situations ends up taking absolute and universal proclamations for granted. Many of us will remember the tragic images of the enormous numbers of Kosovar refugees fleeing from the Serb ethnic cleansing. They were undoubtedly and definitely victims. And it was on the basis of those images that international actions of solidarity suddenly emerged: a 'call of solidarity' was upheld by appeals and non-stop media coverage, and the main international humanitarian agencies converged on the territory. It culminated in the paradoxical delegation to NATO forces and all the aid and assistance operations. And all this took place while NATO's bombs had played a decisive role in stoking this flight, provoking the terrible reprisal by the Serbian malice and what became known as a 'humanitarian disaster' of appalling proportions. Cases like this, though apparently extraordinary, are actually more frequent than stated by supporters and theorists of the *devoir d'ingerence*. The effects of such a coincidence create a real heterogenesis, as in the case of the refugee camps on the south-west borders of Rwanda, where the militia of the 'Hutu power', directly responsible for the Tutsi genocide, ended up with being the collectors of UN humanitarian aid.[24]

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22 For a reconstruction of the various strategies of concealing victims and the effects of the conflict, the Gulf War, see Wolton (1991). For a supporting analysis, used to underline the practices of cognitive neutralisation and removal in an internal political case, see also the work of Wagner (1994). A more general reference, about the effectiveness of concealment and the removal of the dead from the semantic field and the effects of censorship induced by military strategic language, is highlighted in work by Scarry (1989) concerning the portrayal and the political importance of grief.

23 Sontag (1992).

24 See Prunier (1994).

Critically theorizing such situations does not mean asserting that in these cases humanitarian aid was not absolutely necessary. Of course it was. But it does mean that the 'universal' figures of victims 'represented' the contingent product of a specific moment, a moment that was above all *politically determined*. It also means that we recognize that the acceptance of such representations meant accepting the conditions that defined/provoked that situation and that dimension of victims, which would then be employed universally, beyond any historical or political context. In cases like these the quite neutral statement, 'being on the victims' side', reveals all its inadequacies, bias and ambiguity. Better, it means that we recognize the impossibility of maintaining a 'partisan' position that is motivated by universal assumptions and that is, as such, apolitical. In Kosovo, and in Rwanda, is the seriousness of the simple statement 'being on the victims' side' really possible?

Subjects/Objects

The objections and the questions put forward help to spoil the background on which Boltanski tries to legitimise the *devoir d'ingerence*, but they do not entirely eliminate the basic assumption of his political operation, nor do they tarnish its decisive assumption: the universal dimension of the victim as the means of justifying humanitarian action. Boltanski's main argument can be accepted without hesitation: in the utter indecision that characterises an ethical category, the victim is ontologically universal, no matter if he/she is innocent or not: 'Nobody touches Cain'. Yet more difficult, though not impossible (considering the high level of abstraction to which his reasoning forces us), is to pass over the French sociologist's elusions (the collusion between humanitarian, military and political, the role of humanitarianism in the new wars, in the politics of security, in the control of the 'excess'), as well as the deep contradictions humanitarian ethics meets on the ground of concrete effects, the aporias that claims of apolitical universalism unavoidably reproduce.

Conceding all this to Boltanski seems to concede more than what is theoretically legitimate. Yet, there is still a central question that his work avoids: which concept of the subject sustains the representation of the victims? It is a question that has to be split, first by asking what is the meaning of the victim whose universality is assumed? And, second, by asking whether is it still correct to talk about a subject as such? The 'universal' representation of the victims assumes an absolute *impoliticalness*, by this meaning the total absence of *voice* and *agency*. An alleged naturalised condition, where any element of identification, any causal reason is suspended. It is only in this way that it is possible to create a 'universal' figure in order to sanction a *super partes* operation.

Slavoj Žižek, though within a not altogether convincing address, offers us a clear example of this 'natural' condition, quoting a reportage of the *New York Times*, concerning the war in Kosovo, meaningfully entitled: 'In One Kosovo Woman, an Emblem of Suffering'. The article is centred upon a Kosovar woman, witness of the ethnic persecution and therefore involved in the tragic destiny of *displacement* that the majority of Albanian-Kosovars endured. Her testimony states solidarity with all the victims of the bombings, without making any political distinction and claim (such as an

Albanian future for Kosovo) and only affirming the will to see the end of all that she had seen and was seeing: at any price, only 'wishing' a future of peace where everyone could 'keep living'.[25]

It is this kind of unspecified figure (whose suffering is universal and therefore accessible but impossible to geographically and politically locate) that Boltanski's universality is based upon, even when it is motivated by the need to take position. A figures which has been obsessively over-represented by international media in a completely *depoliticised* way, a figure who holds no position if not that of resignation, who holds an attitude of absolute delegation, without any claim to rights, just to live, to live where no right to have rights is recognised, just an unavoidable right to survive.

The point is that it was precisely the representation of such a 'passive' figure that the legitimisation of the 'humanitarian' intervention in Kosovo came about, and it was exactly this kind of figure that the humanitarian war has reproduced in the name of human rights: "We find here the ideological construction of the ideal victim, to whose defence NATO has intervened: it is not a political subject with a clear position, but a defenceless and suffering subject, who sympathises with all those involved in the conflict, entrapped in the madness of a local struggle which can only be laid to rest by a charitable foreign force: a subject whose deepest wish is reduced to that of an animal instinct, 'to feel good again'".[26]

Such 'ideal' victims – who, in order to be recognised as such must lose any content, renounce any claims, and be 'cleaned up' – continuously addresses and 'interpellates' us today. Figures who may even express the most personal feelings, are nonetheless completely depersonalised. Images freeze on faces, names, and stories, highlighting the victims as much as dequalifying them. In so doing, every face becomes interchangeable, serial, collocating itself in a sort of void, without substance, depth and memory; in a time evacuated by history – or where history becomes something natural, and the biographical becomes biological (as in the case of the *National Geographic* cover drawing together two pictures of the same Afghan woman discovered by a photographer twenty years later).

Yet, the Kosovar victim is more than a simple image: she has a voice, she is a witness. But which voice, and which form of witness? The witness is a problematic figure, involving constant updating work, a temporal short-circuit, and a process of subjectivisation. By taking into consideration the critical dimension of the witness which emerges from Primo Levi's *I sommersi e i salvati*, we discover that the over-represented victims, the omnipresent ones in all the petitions made by humanitarian agencies, almost overturn the image of the witness. In the witness accounts of the survivors of the Holocaust, for example, and at the cost of a present tied to the past and

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25 See Žižek (2001). Žižek's analysis is excessive, in my opinion, when opposing the depoliticised figure, and so 'functional' to the 'universal' need for humanitarian intervention, the one that portrays the subversive victim for political instances and is on one side, reaching a paradoxical re-evaluation of the radicalism of the Uck, the paramilitary force in Kosovo, privileged interlocutors of the Western Alliance before the war.

26 *Ibid.*, 142.

a past that is not freed by the present, at risk is the chance of recuperating the singularity of an experience from an event and a context whose aim was precisely to reduce every individual to a body, a number, an indistinct mass. To 'represent' the dimension of the victim led by the media, on the contrary, it is necessary to lose any trace of individuality or memory, to make the figure 'believable', universally accessible, infinitely replaceable. This is why all victims appear today to be the same as each other. And here lies their 'universality'.

This identified and yet completely decontextualised subject (a few inarticulate phrases, a face, a profile, a body) seems to conform *in toto* to the unaccountable figure of the victim, from whom it is possible to affirm the universality of the right of intervention, le *devoir d'ingerence*. This brings to light the intrinsic contradiction of humanitarian logic, which claims to be 'on the victim's side', and which builds itself upon a depoliticised figure upon that which is pure icon, at once hyper-realistic, versatile, easy to handle, and at worst 'pop' (as shown by Oliviero Toscani's pictures). This in turn provides to that specific secular religion which humanitarianism is, a rather paradoxical dimension. Its political claim of self-identification with the figure of a universal victim that is ultimately and *completely depoliticised*.

In other words, the impotence, the total lack of an *agency* and the vagueness of the victim mentioned by Žižek appears to define the 'quality' of the subject Boltanski assumes as the measure of universality of the *devoir d'ingerence*. The question, the last one, then, is therefore: can we really talk about a subject as such? Let us oppose the 'point blank' humanitarian subject that specific, undiscussed but implicit subject (i.e. white, Western, male, Cartesian), on which Boltanski outlines a real phenomenology. That specific subject which, as universalized, loses any intersubjective dimension, insofar as the other does not exist except only as a mere object or an abstract 'eidetic' image. An 'other' towards which it is possible to have sympathy, but which is likewise impossible, out of the question.

We rediscover here, after a long and winding route, the political dimension of the border to which victims are led back, the humanity in excess which is produced continuously by a politics of security and present day wars. A border which appears to be tangible in the abstract opposition between a clearly located subject and undifferentiated masses, between those who watch 'the show of suffering' from a distance and can decide to intervene, and those who experience the sense of the place simply as a condemnation, with no alternatives, no elsewhere. A border which separates those who are still *subjects of rights* from those who, in the best of cases, are *objects of aid*. The fact is that this border continuously shifts, overlapping other boundaries, penetrating 'cities' and concerning many citizens whose belonging seems more and more to become a formal fact. Such a border appears quite real, making it unnecessary to characterize the work of Putin as 'science fiction'. In the overall crisis of citizenship, which encompasses all dimensions of belonging, the excess is everywhere. Russia is near.

What is sure is that only by breaking down this border will the humanitarian (that is, broadly speaking, the discourse on victims) be able to free itself from the suspicion of being simply a device to control humanity's excess. To do this, however, it should firstly have to recognise a subject able to express political instances of equality rather

than provoking moral condemnation of absolute and unredeemable evils.[27] A subject whose material conditions act as the only guarantees of concrete universality – probably the opposite of the abstract universality of the victim.

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27 For a political critique of humanitarianism insisting on the effects of cancelling every egalitarian tension, see Mesnard (2004).

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