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War and the Name-of-the-Father

Guy Briole

«What can be done so that the human masses consigned to the same space, not only a geographic space but sometimes a familial space, might remain separated?» This question posed by Jacques Lacan is relevant to any war of nations, of clans or of families. But there are distinctions that must be made here. The wars of fathers are wars of conquest for the survival of their own, for their security, for their honor. The wars of sons are wars of vengeance, to make a name for themselves by restoring or sustaining the ideal of the father, or just as well to attempt to break away from him, so great a burden he may turn out to be. The sons take up the wars where the fathers have left them. Contemporary history shows to what extent the sons can carry the chastisement beyond the laws that the fathers had taken as their limit. The pretext: the fathers had not treated the evil, leaving it in place, a menace for all.

The decline of ideals is often put forward in contemporary discourse to explain this war-like frenzy, as disorderly as it is multifocal, and also to justify the rise of racisms and segregation. One pretends to be surprised by this and persists in misconstruing what Freud had remarkably demonstrated in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: behind the screen of civilization, which contributes to the pacification of the relations between men in their fundamental instincts, nothing changes. Social constraints, the education system, or even the army participate in an attempt to channel these instinctive forces by finding for them acceptable issues and by managing as well as possible the «left-over», inherent in any social group. But, the disruption of social bonds and the fact that the father is being put into question over his idea of a Nation, revive the tensions between the groups within a same State, reactivate rancor and hatred, and bring back into the open promises of vengeance. Once again and inexorably men are prepared to engage in the worst, so aware they are that the nets of war are being tightened around them.

IN THE MIRROR, THE RICOCHET

Among the virtues that Sun Tse distinguishes for a warrior, he retains the love for his comrades in arms but, more generally, «love for his fellow-men». It is not the least of paradoxes to say that in order to fight a better war you must love your fellow-man. Lacan, after Freud, emphasized the ferocity behind this commandment: *Love thy neighbor as thyself*.

Freud leaves no alternative other than to take seriously the observation that «the most profound essence of man» pushes him to egoism, cruelty and destruction. These motions persist in our unconscious and Freud does not hesitate to say that if we were judged with respect to these motions, we would be considered, like the men of our origins, as «a gang of assassins». He insisted again on these morbid tendencies in man in his *Discontent* by showing how man uses his neighbor to satisfy his need for aggression, «using him sexually without his consent, appropriating what he possesses, humiliating him, making him suffer, martyring him and killing him».

The neighbor is a wicked being and the presence within him of wickedness is the «consequence of the commandment to love one's neighbor». The violence and aggressiveness in direction of the neighbor is another modality of the violence turned on oneself. In the mortal face to face that situations of war produce what does the other demand? «Kill me or spare me»? That is the echo of ambivalence that can be fatal to him and that Freud discriminated for the soldier: kill or be killed. War confronts man with the expression of the violence contained within him against his neighbor at the same time as he feels constrained by another commandment marked by a prohibition: *Thou shalt not kill*.

Death endured is the complementary side of death given. The bullet ricochets on the mirror and comes back to the one who had destined it for the other. This is just one of the variants of the turning around of a weapon, an altruistic form of the sacrifice of one's life.

The relation of exclusion, «it's him or me», brought into evidence in the aggressiveness inherent in narcissism finds its paroxysm in the situation of war. A war that can only be have the mirror as its principle. This radicality of imaginary aggressiveness is displayed when what pacifies the relation and keeps it at a distance comes to lack: «a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervening of a word, that is to say of the father» argues J. Lacan. Then the chaos of the war is related to that of the imaginary dissolution. The crepuscule of Schreber's world joins that of the warrior and it is the other of the imaginary axis that is found to be the recipient of the insult, swine!

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE AND THE LOGIC OF GENOCIDE

The modern warrior does not escape the rule defined by Georges Dumézil : no one wages a war for himself, but always on account of an other. Indeed we can say of an Other. Whenever he thinks he is unique, he is in fact only an instrument of the collective. An instrument of war that, outfitted with protections and equipped with electronic devices, feels he is invincible and can only think of the death of the other. This modern warrior could be one of the children Freud talks about and who would write home from the front: «Dear Mom, when you die...». He merges rather than identifying with the indestructible machine-man. He wants to believe in it. But the facts, above all the facts of war, dismantle the utopias. Nevertheless, on this path, man does not give up and he keeps an unshakable faith in technology. He always wants to believe that this time, with the help of science and thanks to its progress, he is finally going to get to this individual that will be an exception to all the others. He forgets that the one who uses him can still manipulate him as he wishes. This man also forgets that, because they were made of lead, the soldiers of his childhood had no other existence than what his own imagination breathed into them. At one moment, one of them could triumph over an entire army and be the object of the enthusiastic child's passion. At another moment, this same army of figurines could find itself the object of a total disaffection, when the interest of the child turned elsewhere. Today the game is intersideral and the child of yesterday finds a new interest in it, the reality of war seeming so well to be confused with the fictions of his videogames. The imaginary is unchained, the attack has the status of a declaration of war, the transposed infantile cruelty is displayed with no limit. Wars no longer have names. They have been obliterated in favor of operations that no longer aim at reestablishing peace or envisaging it within the framework of a renewed legislation, but at the total destruction of the enemy designated by virtue of nothing more than their *small differences*. So everything happens according to a logic of genocide: segregation in the name of a distinctive feature, designation and regrouping, then systematic elimination. They operate venture by venture. One operation over, one drags one's purifying morals to another place. The world is full of wicked beings, the task is infinite! Nothing any longer limits the imaginary whose overflow is aggravated by the unilateral power of the arms and of the reference to moral conscience.

THE RETURN OF THE SAME

Today it is said we have new Gods — in the world of science, of consumption, of humanitarian ideals, in the cyberworld, etc. or renewed ties with the already known Gods, with the recrudescence of religions and the reinforcement of sects. There is said to be a hope on the side of the Gods and their disciples, in order to make up for the fathers in disgrace, or eliminated.

Modern society finds itself under the influence of the «rise of the discourse of science», correlative to the fall of ideals as well as the function of the father, and consequently, of religions.

Is that what we are faced with or is it rather a rise in violence, a solidification of the religious under its most extremist aspects? We continue to kill, to decimate, to eliminate with a formidable systematization due to a segregation, which is always accomplished in the name of the father.

Translated by Thelma Sowley