ONE FACE OF DEHUMANIZATION: ANIMALIZATION

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Abstract

Dehumanization is a deliberately distorted perception of otherness – and a very efficient crime facilitator. One of its forms, animalization, is intended to arouse disgust, a major ingredient of negation of intimacy, in its turn a constituent of the triangle of hate. Various hypotheses and experiments attempt to elucidate the mechanism of disgust and hate, including the purported existence of a brain "switch". The Aristotelian division between man and animal, biting into the territory of humankind, persisted through the Enlightenment and into the contemporary era. Its endurance gives little hope about a significant change of mindset.

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1. Crime facilitators

In *The Nature of Hate* (2008), Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Sternberg cite both the Fundamental Attribution Error, whereby people, out of a desire for simplification, often tend to blame wrongdoings on the evil nature of the perpetrator rather than the circumstances in which they were committed, and Zimbardo's work on situational forces that ordinary people are unable to cope with, which turn them into criminals. The variables that facilitate such deeds are:

   a) diffusion of responsibility (when one is part of a group of perpetrators one may assume that others have done the harm);
   b) obedience to authority (obeying orders as a supreme value is to be found among unexpectedly large numbers of ordinary people);
   c) anonymity (such as wearing a mask or war paint, to which maybe we should add the confidence that no witness will be able to disclose the perpetrator's identity);
   d) dehumanization (depriving the targeted person or group of their human character, both through propaganda and through violence) (Sternberg & Sternberg 2008: 41). The most frequent form taken by dehumanization is animalization.

In contexts that meet a number of, or all, these conditions, killing becomes chillingly unproblematic. When backed by efficient propaganda, the pilots of a

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bomber squadron destroying enemy positions, the members of a firing squad executing a traitor, a murderer, or a war criminal, and even an angry mob unleashed by a political leader benefit from all four morally extenuating circumstances, not to mention the legal ones in the first two cases. But the chain of events is not always so generous. One variable or a combination of the first three variables involve moral qualms or other considerations that could act as reins, preventing action. Although all four are documented crime facilitators, Sternberg & Sternberg are cautious about the situationist perspective, which raises serious legal and moral problems on the ways and extent of sanctioning transgressions.

2. The role of disgust

Sternberg & Sternberg's inclusive *duplex theory of hate* propounds three dimensions of hate: negation of intimacy, passion, and commitment, whose proportions vary with individuals and situations; and a series of archetypal stories of hate (the impure other, the controller, the enemy of God, and so forth), each designating a specific type of enemy and activating one, two, or all the components of hate.

The first component of the "triangle of hate", *passion* (i.e. anger, fear), is the response to threat, and it grows and vanishes rapidly; *commitment*, based on contempt leading to the devaluation of its target, grows and fades slowly; the third component, *negation of intimacy*, which develops and disappears gradually, involves disgust, often in the absence of any contact with the target (the typical case is anti-Semitism without Jews).

Disgust can be induced by hate propaganda, which "depicts the individual as subhuman or inhuman, or otherwise incapable of receiving, giving or sustaining feelings of closeness, warmth, caring, communication, compassion, and respect" (Sternberg & Sternberg 2008: 60). Thus dormant aversion is awakened and previous casual intimacy turned upside down, as in the case of Christians and Muslims in Bosnia, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or Shiite and Sunnis in Arab countries. The most relevant story that addresses sub- or inhumanness is "the animal pest":

The hated enemy is an animal pest, such as a germ, an insect such as a cockroach, a reptile, or some kind of a beast. [...] These stories become more powerful as those who perceive themselves as victims feel that the violations occur on a repeated basis. (Sternberg & Sternberg 2008: 91).

Certainly, only some animals arouse disgust (inferior sub-groups such as worms, insects or reptiles, but also some mammals, e.g. rats), while others are considered

nice or desirable. Religious and cultural taboos (e.g. killing or eating a clan animal, eating an impure animal) play a decisive role in the categorization.

Even though the animal pest story is specifically designed to dehumanize, "the stranger," "the faceless foe," and "the barbarian" stories also cast doubt on the humanity of the enemy, albeit to a lesser degree.

3. Systematic indoctrination

To fully understand the mechanism that leads to hatred and/or murder, we must remember that both the potential perpetrator and the intended victim are simultaneous targets of the indoctrination process. If the former were shown that those he hurts are individuals like himself, there might be a chance for empathy; but the victim is usually dehumanized and deindividualized before that. The perpetrator's latent empathy, hence *sympathy*, for the victim must be eliminated by the very acts of dehumanization. What follows is that

We shut this portal to suppress identification with an enemy group. We do so by removing their individuality, defining them as an anonymous mass of unpleasant, inferior specimens of a different taxonomic group. (de Waal 2009: 214).

All the scientific evidence designed to explain the causes of cruelty points in the same direction. Citing research on torturers who served dictatorships in Latin America and Greece, Goleman finds the common denominator in the "very methodical indoctrination" to which they had been submitted:

It begins by first seeing the people who are victims as evil, not as people. The very first step is to deaden yourself to the other person as a person. […] Then they are very slowly made to do something that at first is very unpleasant, and then made to repeat it and repeat it until they become inured to it. There must be some unfortunate brain changes that go along with this. (Goleman 2004: 291).

As in other situations in which prevalent moral standards are breached (Paul Ekman exemplifies with marital infidelity and lying), the hardest part is the beginning. Once the first act of cruelty has been committed, with each subsequent act it becomes easier to transgress the accepted rules (Goleman 2004: 153). The proposed solution – "finding ways to prevent the first act" – is obviously unrealistic.

What could the "brain changes" mentioned by Goleman actually mean?

Moreover: If it is impossible to prevent, then maybe it is possible to cure. Is indoctrination able to fundamentally alter behavior and, more dramatically, morals?

4. Moral disengagement and switches

The upsetting results of a famous experiment suggest that it takes much less. Zimbardo cites the work of his Stanford colleague Albert Bandura, who coined the term "moral disengagement" to explain a controversial state in which, similar to a gearshift pushed into neutral, moral standards are "disengaged" by submission to tactics of dehumanization, hence prepared to shift into aggressive mode when pushed. The same technique previously used by Milgram was applied here: the subjects were supposed to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks to "learners" in order to punish them for their mistakes, the ultimate task being to improve their problem-solving capabilities. During the experiment, some of the subjects "overheard" the experimenters complain about some of the "learners" and comparing them to animals. The consequence was that from that moment on the intensity of the shocks increasingly differed: "learners" compared to animals ("an animalistic, rotten bunch") received level-8 shocks, whereas the "learners" labeled as nice guys ("perceptive, understanding," etc.) received level-3 shocks, and those who were not labeled at all received 5-level shocks on the average. It was enough to hear an unknown person tell an unknown authority that an individual quite similar to the subject was less than human to completely change the mental perception of that individual (Zimbardo 2009: 17-18). The researchers emphasized the disinhibiting power of dehumanization on the perpetrators.

What is it that makes an ordinary person suddenly hate, torture or kill a stranger? Various authors speculated on the existence of a neural switch, probably located in the paleomammalian (emotional) brain (Dozier 2002: 25), or a psychological switch allowing identification with people who share common beliefs, the same age, profession, etc. (de Waal 2009), which enables an individual to turn off empathy. Thus, the inhibition against killing, based on the innate capacity for pity as a phylogenetic adaptation (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972: 99), is neutralized.

Supposing it is so simple for ordinary healthy individuals to switch off empathy and morally disengage, there can hardly be talk of a solution to cruelty and dehumanization. Fortunately, as shown by Zimbardo's experiments, the effect of moral disengagement is not permanent, and the subjects sooner or later return to their "normal" self.

5. Working definitions and mechanisms

Dehumanization is perhaps the most efficient crime facilitator due to its comparative advantage: it is the only variable of the four mentioned by Sternberg & Sternberg that, by stripping the victim of its humane character, equates it with an animal fit for slaughter, freeing the perpetrator from moral qualms. (Herein

"animal" is not a restrictive substitute for mammal, but has the broader sense, that of any living organism).

A practical working definition assumes that

Dehumanization is a psychological construct which has been very broadly defined as the denial of humanness to others, the negative consequences of which have been well documented empirically. These consequences include various forms of antisocial behavior, especially violence directed toward those dehumanized. (Moller & Deci 2009: 43).

Attributing traits of an animal to a human being is the straightest way to dehumanization. Roberts refers to animalization as:

the course of action that grew out of a number of theories aimed first at establishing human superiority over animals and then at the domination of certain classes and groups – a process that sought to ascribe, both "philosophically" and "scientifically," the presumed inferiority and brutality of various animals to these groups and classes. (Roberts 2008: x).

Although the boundaries that proclaim the inferiority of animals were drawn long ago, it must be emphasized that animalization does not always aim to demean, exploit or liquidate individuals or out-groups, and nor does the reverse process of anthropomorphism: for example, Egyptian animal gods or clan, tribal or team identification with a totem-animal obviously have other functions. Neither a Christian compared by Jesus with a sheep ("My sheep listen to my voice" – John 10:27), nor Richard the Lionheart would reject the association. During the World Wars, the British portrayed themselves as lions or bulldogs. Such examples may continue indefinitely.

Also, considering that animals, including predators, parasites and viruses, are morally neutral (the human attributes they are invested with in fables are only literary techniques such as personification or metaphor, therefore the assimilation is purely linguistic), it is illogical to compare the targeted individuals or groups with them. Disease and disease-related "sub-animals" (cancer, microbes, bacteria, germs, viruses, etc.), albeit as morally neutral as superior animals, can more easily be perceived as evil. Notwithstanding, disease names are more rarely used than animal ones.

When animalization does play a destructive role, it is – in Bandura's words – to "morally disengage" a perpetrator. Through the disparaging comparison pointing at the inferiority of other humans, animalization fulfils a major function. Levin & Rabrenovic (2004: 36) claim that dehumanization of the enemy is a tool used pro- or retroactively to "reduce the feelings of guilt and shame associated with

murdering decent and honorable human beings." After all, slaughtering cattle or fowl is, evolutionarily, necessary for survival, just like eliminating microbes. In the most extreme form of dehumanization, according to the "either us or them" assumption, only the in-group is destined to survive.

6. Animalization at various times

Animalization is an ancient, time-tested tactic with quick results. The boundaries and divisions between humans and animals preoccupied philosophers such as Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, whose views are analyzed by Roberts among others.

In classical antiquity comparison to animals generally aimed either at an inferior social organization or at individual vices usually resulted from a reliance on feelings and emotions rather than rational thinking, which did not however deprive the individual in question of his humanity (Isaac 2006: 196). A clear, concise expression of the prevailing taxonomy is provided by a late and very influential Stoic, Marcus Aurelius: "The things that have life are superior to those that do not, and of those that have life, the superior are those that have reason." (*Meditations* V.16). While this seems to imply that humans and animals are separated by the presence and absence of rational thinking, humans have often been blamed by other humans for the lack thereof; consequently, one like Aristotle was able to equate non-Greeks with animals and regard slaves as more akin to animals than to their Greek masters. Thus, he established an authority invoked almost two millennia later to enslave American Indians (Isaac 2006: 200), as the need was reiterated to classify the newfound races in the Age of Discovery, which brought Europeans in contact with new territories and populations.

Even modern democratic thinkers tended to categorize Amerindians and black people in Aristotelian fashion, as in a mock taxonomy inspired by Linné's. For example, Voltaire's polygenistic view is revealed in *Traité de métaphysique* (1734) and other works, such as *La Septième lettre d'Amabed* (1769), which suggests different origins of the black and white races respectively: "It is a big question among them whether they [Africans] are descended from monkeys, or monkeys come from them" (Voltaire 1769). His contemporary, Jefferson is also tempted to compare black people to apes, writing about "the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species" (Jefferson 1785).

Ironically, such early modern and Enlightenment racist views that disparaged the victims of European expansion and imperialism were demonstrated – and at the same time proven as only half-true – by a liberal with anti-slavery inclinations: Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and especially *The Descent of Man* (1871) provide evidence of the common ancestry of human races on the one hand and the human species and apes on the other. In war propaganda, comparison of the

enemy to apes is one of the most compelling, given the proximity of the two species.

Scientific progress did not put an end to the animalization practice. The step from wondering about the origin of "savages" to labeling them as inferior species was made by racist literature and climaxed with Nazi propaganda, which described its enemies as vermin. Soviet propaganda was also replete with "animal pest" stories.

Totalitarian regimes were joined by democratic ones in labeling enemies as animals. British and American World War I "ape propaganda" against Germans and World War II posters depicting the Japanese as apes chasing white women with knives in their hands, or as snakes or rats that had to be caught in "Jap traps" abounded, as did atrocity stories about them (Sternberg & Sternberg 2008: 147).

7. State-sponsored dehumanization

Understanding the mechanism can help in recognizing manipulation, discarding a false enemy, and/or identifying the real one. The motives of mass murder and genocide are "a mix of primitive hatred, rational calculation, indifference, and impulsive violence" (Dozier 2002: 73), but the trigger is always the result of systematic dehumanization. Every ruler or institution that ever waged a battle knew it a long time before even the word propaganda was coined. Although the specifics vary, dehumanizing the prospected enemy to set a favorable context for killing works in exactly the same way irrespective of the social order. Once its effects are widespread, the enemy targeted by dehumanization becomes exposed to attack at any time, by any – sometimes unexpected – individual or group of people.

Dehumanization became the most powerful tool of propaganda, and whether it comes before or after hatred is irrelevant: the enemy is there and must be fought, irrespective of who sparked off the crisis. The dehumanization policy endorsed by the state is not only a direct cause of atrocities against the targeted enemy: it also legitimizes them.

Paranoid regimes discriminate between us and them just like an individual's primitive neural system. They define the "other" as enemy, and come up with a stalking-horse to convince the favored in-group to attack the out-group (Gaylin 2003: 211). This was the case of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, South Africa's apartheid, Khmer-Rouge Cambodia, or Rwanda. Arendt, for instance, identifies race as the Boers' answer to "the overwhelming monstrosity of Africa." The justification of massacres perpetrated by Europeans against "brutes" on all continents lies in the traditional notion of inferior race whose humanity is cancelled:

This answer resulted in the most terrible massacres in recent history, the Boers' extermination of Hottentot tribes, the wild murdering by Carl Peters in German Southeast Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population – from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people; and finally, perhaps worst of all, it resulted in the triumphant introduction of such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies. (Arendt 1979: 185).

Although reprehensible, the government actions aimed to gain advantages or the coherence and unity of the in-group by targeting an out-group are understandable, whereas the readiness shown by the masses in tuning in and uncritically repeating obviously untruthful, malicious propaganda by "switching off pity" can perhaps be attributed only to the primitive neural system taking over consciousness out of a self-protective need for safety, safeguarded by the protector-state. Doubters are often under the threat of being left out of the in-group, hence forced to "jump on the bandwagon."

8. The jungle of early Romanian communism

Similarly to other languages, Romanian traditionally associates human qualities and animals: a stupid person is a cow or an ox, a rude one is a donkey, a stubborn one is a mule, a filthy or shameless one is a pig, a faithful (but also a mean) one is a dog, a sly one is a fox, a fearful one is a rabbit, an arrogant one is a cock, a traitor is a snake, a slow person is a snail, a hardworking one is a bee, a lazy one is a drone, and so on. But animalization for political purposes is a whole different story.

It was not communism that first wielded animalization as a political cudgel. Even before the short-lived anti-Semitic "National-Legionary State" rose to power, in comparatively democratic interwar Romania, anti-Semitic periodicals were abundant with animalistic imagery: Jews were assimilated with necrophagous (hyenas of death, jackals, flocks of ravens), carnivorous (wolves, sharks, crocodiles, etc.), or hematophagous (snakes, spiders, bedbugs, bloodsuckers bloated with Romanian blood, etc.) animals (Oişteanu 2004: 428). The leader of the Iron Guard, C. Z. Codreanu, compared Jews with vipers and greedy wolves (ibidem).

Early Romanian communist literature also teems with "animal pest" stories and its own animal metaphors for class enemies, who must be invariably presented as moral and physical monsters. In 'The Class Enemy from Caricature to the Firing Squad' (2012), Cristoiu quotes the report 'Literature in the People's Republic of Romania and its development perspectives' presented by Mihai Beniuc at the first Congress of the Writers of PRR that took place between 18-23 June 1956, in which the Proletkult poet who specialized in animal psychology (sic) looks back at the animalization that haunted socialist realist literature in the first decade of Romanian communism:

Back then, the enemy used to be called: the dog, the mad dog, the wolf, the beast, the hyena, the viper, the rabid snake. Thus, one was as deafened by engines and pounding hammers that produced tremendous welfare as terrified by such dangerous monsters. From the factory one stepped right into the jungle. (Cristoiu 2012: 31).

Unlike the belligerents in the world (and other) wars, communism, a professed ideology of equality, could not practice a natural, i.e. racial/biological, type of animalization, but only a cultural, i.e. social/functional one, once popular in classical antiquity, and revived by communist animal metaphoritis. The difference from ancient animalization was that emphasis now shifted from non-rational behavior to alleged vices such as greed, lust for domination, treachery, etc. with their respective enemy stories: the controller, the faceless foe, the morally bankrupt, the greedy enemy, the power monger, the subtle infiltrator, or the thwarter of destiny. In addition, the target was now an entire social-political category rather than the democratic moral typologies of classical fables. Most animal epithets depict the former elite of the "bourgeois-landlord regime," from politicians to industrialists and kulaks, and foreign "enemies," with a place of honor reserved for British and American "imperialists." Kulaks were "she-snakes' kin" (Eugen Jebeleanu) and "the one-time wolf of the village" (Aurel Gurghianu), American businessmen were "fat moneyed bulldogs barking" (Radu Boureanu) or "scuffling wolves" (Eugen Frunză) (Cristoiu 2012: 25,29), and so forth.

An inventory of animal tropes is listed below, in a descending order, from superior to inferior classes (neither the years, nor the titles are mentioned: the period is 1948-1955, and the titles are irrelevant):

"The pack that aims for war again" (Mihu Dragomir), "the packs hungry for a new war" (Maria Banuş), "the wild pack set against the game" (Dan Deşliu), "the hangman Broz [Tito] passed with his pack" (Radu Boureanu), "sly, murderous wolf" (Aurel Rău), "wolves … lurking with bullet eyes" (Eugen Jebeleanu), "wicked wolf packs" (Dan Deşliu), "Truman's wolves" (Mihai Beniuc), "from the wolves' claws we snatched the gardens and the beehives' wealth" (Dan Deşliu), "cursed high-born dogs ready to murder" (Maria Banuş), "dogs fighting blindly for stacks of dollars and pounds" (Dan Deşliu), "jackals … clenching modern arms in their claws" (Eugen Frunză), "British jackals" (Radu Boureanu), "jackals come stretching their paws" (Ştefan Iureş alluding that His Majesty Michael I and former politicians are being paid by the USA), "you'll get out like foxes from their dens, Mr. Pot-Bellied Banker" (Mihai Beniuc), "the pigs sticking their snouts again in the garden" (Eugen Frunză), "rats grown in their plague-stricken holes intent on spreading around the world the famous American way of life" (Dan Deşliu), "they are afraid of the red flames, the frocked big-bellied bats" (Eugen Jebeleanu); "up in the clouds still hover harriers" (Nina Cassian), "owls loaded with bling bling"

(Eugen Jebeleanu), "hawks with poisoned claws" (Nicolae Tăutu), "let the ravens learn" (Maria Banuș), "ravens crowing for dollars" (Dan Deșliu); "the snake with rattles on its tail" and "vipers with swastikas on their foreheads" (Mihai Beniuc), "snakes hiding in tree hollows" (Eugen Frunză), "we chased away the gilded crowned snake" (Dan Deșliu), "nothing scares me, neither the snakes, nor the jackals" (Maria Banuș), "hissing vipers" (Eugen Frunză), "vipers with rusted tongues" (Nicolae Tăutu), "the black dragon … squirms on a heap of gold and bloodied banknotes" (Mihai Beniuc); "sharks prowling" (Letiția Popa); "earthworms of sick death" (Eugen Frunză), "caterpillars … don't hesitate to crush them under foot," "the world's worms" (Radu Boureanu); "the medieval hornets' nest" (Eugen Frunză), "bloodthirsty spider stretching its deadly web," "venomous spider" (Radu Boureanu), "the pool is pouring out mosquitoes, spiders, and flies" (Mihai Beniuc) (Cristoiu 2012: 31-33).

The list can be extended with thousands of examples from other poems or from prose, newspaper articles, or graphic art.

The phenomenon also works the other way around: a political prisoner dehumanizes his guard because he cannot find any empathy in him:

I did not consider the guard to be a human being. He was the enemy, who hated me without reason, out of mental sluggishness. He had been told that I was his enemy and that he had to hate me, and he did just that, without thinking that I hadn't wronged him, his relatives, or anybody else in any way. (Chioreanu 218: 1992).

Elsewhere, the author rhetorically asks himself how people could turn into beasts in the name of a doctrine that preached love, truth and equality (Chioreanu 223: 1992).

Another political detainee calls his torturer-investigator "the green roundworm" (Pavlovici 25: 2011) and compares his tongue to an ovipositor of hate and scorn (Pavlovici 24: 2011), while another guard is deemed to be descended from a rabid dog (Pavlovici 167: 2011).

9. Conclusion

Hate speech comparing target groups or individuals to inferior beings on the evolution scale, especially when disseminated among the poorly educated masses from the heights of state authority, is a crucial instrument in fueling latent resentment and moral disengagement on the part of the audience, and opens the way to discrimination, persecution and mass murder.

The basic, rudimentary, and highly efficient process of animalization (hence its strong appeal) pervades history, including written history, in a variety of forms. At

least two factors contribute to the likelihood that animalization will remain an effective weapon to be wielded against out-groups: this solid tradition and the concreteness of its simple, powerful images, not necessarily effective only among the politically incorrect.

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