

## **Global Wars and Local Grievances \***

### **Or Globalizing the Unethical**

In California the days are bright as usual. People work and move around as usual. They dance and shop, more or less as usual. It is difficult to see that this is a country in war. I wonder if it was the same during all other 'bigger' wars: the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the war with Yugoslavia. I guess so. The Vietnam War we heard a lot about. It is judged to be bad, mainly because of the U.S. army's losses, while the Iraq and the Yugoslavia wars are considered OK. They were just wars. The war in Afghanistan is not questionable at all. In difference to all other wars it is at least describable as self-defense.

#### **Bond, James Bond**

There is an interesting similarity between the last two wars, the 'new' war in Afghanistan and the James Bond movies. In Iraq the main enemy was one person, called a dictator, Saddam Hussein. (In order to 'get' him 200.000 civilians many of which children were killed as a result of U.S. bombings.) In Yugoslavia the US bombings continued until another person was 'handed in', Milosevich. (We still don't have information on how many civilians, hospitals, homes, schools were bombed there. Why don't we know about such facts?) In Afghanistan it is Osama bin Laden who is the chased man. In James Bond movies we have the good, namely the brave, clever, and cool Bond who uses all kinds of sophisticated technology and the bad, a single maniac, a clever but mad evil man who wants to destroy and/or control the world. The good prevails with great effort, kills only in self-defense or simply as a result of circumstances. The bad mad man is followed blindly by some either less intelligent or indoctrinated humans. Very often they speak with foreign accents - German, Russian, Indian, etc. There is no question about the good in the good and the bad in the bad. The foreign is distant, inexplicable, odd, and simply evil.

The viewers associate with the cool and the good. This is part of the entertainment. However, when the plot becomes reality, the old good-bad duality becomes a very unreal scenario. We do know that we are not always good and not always bad. We also know that what is bad and good depends on many things, e.g. the observer's viewpoint. But if the observer always thinks that he is right and has the right to point to others that they are not, then reality becomes pretty limited. What globalization can we talk about within the straight jackets of these stereotypes? The communication becomes directed one way. The ability to recognize Otherness in its own right of existence and leave it to be is gone. Communication becomes a self-feeding self-righteous talk where one or each party does not consider the other as Other but as a wrong part of itself and measures it only according to its own means of measurement. There is no place for misunderstanding; both parties believe they understand the other and know better. Such globalization is not different from colonialization or in more modern terms, macdonalization.

All I read and hear today in the US press and from people is the propagated illusion of knowing the other. There is no question of whether there is something, which is not understood. This is a monological talk, where there is no Other, no dialogue, not even an attempt for a dialogue. A perfect confirmation and example of that are the headlines in the newspapers today (15.10.2001): "Bush says no to negotiations" or "Taliban's request to negotiate again denied" or "Giuliani Refuses Saudi's Check". We should not forget also that at the international meeting organized by the UN few weeks before the attacks on the World Trade Center the U.S. and the Israeli delegations left the negotiation table (thus they sabotaged not only the represented Arab countries but also the authority of the United Nations). Interestingly enough, there is not a word about this major diplomatic incident in the leading U.S. press.

### **Multiple wars - cold or warm**

The last movie I saw with my son this summer was 'Dogs and Cats'. The dogs were the moody but good American-English-speaking agents while the bad guys (who included the silent Chinese-looking Ninja cats) led by a mad evil cat, talked with Russian accents. When the Chinese authorities requested an apology from the U.S. authorities for the incident with the U.S. air-force planes flying over China, the Times for Kids magazine explained how clever President Bush was in his response: he said that he is sorry for the incident. The clever part, the magazine insisted is that in American English 'I am sorry' does not mean 'I apologize for what I did' but "I am sorry for what happened to you" however translated to Chinese it meant an apology. In this way Bush did not apologize but it looked like he did, and he did the compromise to even say sorry only in order to keep peace! Not only that there is no dialogue, no responsibility and no desire for dialogue but even the U.S. kids are thought to avoid dialogue and responsibility.

In the New York Times from Friday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2001, I read an article where the author wrote that Putin has claimed that Russia is part of western culture and history and that he would like to see Russia more involved in the activities of western civilization. This was presented as a claim not as a fact. A warning immediately followed it: "how many compromises is the U.S. ready to make in order to fight terrorism?" It was accompanied also by a doubt about how much Russia can and does help the U.S. This goes to show that the author did not think that Russia is part of western civilization because a compromise is necessary to acknowledge that. The U.S. has to make a compromise to accept Tchaikovski, Dostojevski, Balanchine, Tolstoj, Pushkin, Blok etc. as part of 'their' civilization. But there is no doubt for the author that ancient Greek culture is part of U.S. history. (Indeed the Greek army is right now ready to receive urgent orders to send young soldiers to Afghanistan.) Russia was accused of violating the human rights during the Cold War but the U.S. are not responsible for humiliating and nearly extinguishing the American Indian population, their properties, cultures, and languages during the same period not to talk about the violation of right for happiness of the black population.

In general, the U.S. or the so-called western civilization accepts, acknowledges, allows, denies, refuses, makes compromises. Western

civilization and specifically the U.S. act as the administration of the world. This reminds me acutely of the way the Indians were treated by Columbus, Cortés and the Spanish court, where they were brought before the court as slaves in order for the Christian judges to establish if they were human or not.

### **Export of abortion and feminism**

Another form of monologism and cultural imposition is the export of feminism. Thousands of US dollars have been collected to support abortions in Afghanistan, the leading figure in this campaign being M. Albright. She does not mention that statistically the U.S. itself is one of the worst countries in the world to take care of mothers and especially young mothers, with one of the highest rates of death during birth (the official statistics were broadcasted on Mother's Day 2001 in the radio program 'Beneath the Surface', National Public Radio).

Now, during the bombing of the Afghan women's homeland, the US press is excited to show how the Taliban are suppressing women; but not only the Taliban - all Arabs treat their women badly and this is a motivation for many intelligent mothers here to support the U.S. bombings. When Albright protested that the abortion funds had been frozen, Bush answered that he didn't think people should have abortions anywhere. But in one respect, namely the ethical one, both pro-abortion and anti-abortion voices are identical in this case: they do not question at all the rights of the U.S. people/government to decide on the lives of children, which consequently affect mothers and fathers, in Afghanistan or anywhere else. There is no doubt that global feminism or at least abortion is for the good of all humans (Albright); there is no doubt that abortions are bad for all people (Bush). This, of course, is part of the motivation for changing the Taliban government. Any argument would work.

### **Regimes-governments, casualties-massacres**

When referring to the U.S., U.K., Germany or any other member of NATO, governments are called governments or administrations, but when talking about countries, with which the U.S. is uncomfortable, "regimes" is the label they are given. A regime connotes something oppressive and temporary. It leads to beloved expressions such as *violation of human rights* (which are anchored more to times of slavery than to conditions of human happiness) and immediately becomes part of the argumentation for changing it by force or in any other way. Again, the change is for the good. Such governments are already presented as something temporary so their change is already given in the terminology used to refer to them. The Bush administration is also temporary and did not win the popular vote, but it is still odd to say "the Bush regime". The New Turks took power by military force in Turkey, however they are not called a regime but rather a government.

### **The Whoareyouland**

How does the monologicistic talk look? Lets take an example from history (from a great book by Tzvetan Todorov, a French-Bulgarian linguist and

semiotician, "The Conquest of America - the Question of Otherness", p.99):

When Cortés reached the first lands of the New Continent his soldiers shouted from the ship to the naked people they saw at the shoreline:

"What is the name of this land?"

The Indians answered:

"Ma'c'ubah than."

The Spaniards heard 'Yucatan' and wrote down "The Indians told us that the name of this province is Yucatan". And so we call it even today. But what they didn't know was that the meaning of the Indians' answer was: "We don't understand your words".

After that followed horrible violence where millions of Indians were killed. The tragedy stems not from the lack of understanding but from the assumption of understanding. The Spaniards were sure that if they posed a question they would receive an answer to their question. It was foreign to them to imagine not only that they could not be understood but that their desires were not necessarily recognized, nor righteous to others. They couldn't imagine that the answer was not the intended or the wanted one. The question was imperative, the understanding given. The U.S. foreign politics as well are imperative and possess self-certain interpretation of Otherness.

### **Responsibility, violence and proximity**

I wonder if any of the people I see around me here in California, who do not protest and are not detested by the bombings going on in Afghanistan now and in other places before, if any of these individuals were sent to fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and given knives, would they really do it? Would they kill men, women, and children? Would they set fire to their homes with their own hands? I doubt that. So, why then, do they support a policy, which does the same: destroys homes, hospitals and roads and kills men, women, and children, be they Arabs or Slavs. Why are they ready to send bombs to do "justice" instead of fists and knives? The proximity of an agent influences his sense of responsibility. The degree of responsibility influences the degree of violence in which one is willing to engage.

When describing the magnitude of the disaster caused by the Spaniards' curiosity, greed and desire for expansion, Todorov gives an interesting classification of the genocide (in fact Todorov dedicates his book to the memory of a married Mayan woman who was thrown to and devoured by dogs when she refused to be defiled by another man):

1. Acts of direct responsibility such as outright murder killed a high number Indians; nonetheless the number was relatively small measured against all who died (we are still talking about millions).
2. Acts of less responsibility such as ill treatment killed a higher number.
3. Acts of indirect and diffused responsibility such as diseases, "microbe shock" or depression killed the majority of the population. (p. 133)

A number of psychological studies point out the same relation between violence, proximity, and responsibility. After the Vietnam War, it is my impression that the U.S. military prefers to fight wars at a greater distance, wars that consist mainly of bombing, not the deployment of ground troops. And if there are ground fights, they follow the bombings and are called peacekeeping missions. Thus the wars become more virtual in their performance, but also in their experience by the 'audience', by the press-readers and TV-viewers. To watch planes bombing landscapes is much less violent and bears less responsibility than killing and destroying with one's own hands.

### **Audience and executions**

Until few years ago, in the western cultures, executions of criminals were not performed publicly. People did not gather around the guillotine, did not throw stones, did not participate in the distribution of justice. Not only that, there is clear distancing from body pain (cf. Foucault). It is acceptable to throw bombs but not to cut throats. The later is considered barbarian, the first - civilized.

Today however, the disgust of physical severe abuse still works but the participation in public executions and distribution of justice is back. The best examples are the U.S. TV-programs showing either chasing of criminals or court proceedings. The latest noisiest public prosecution was the case of the teenager who was accused for setting a bomb in a huge building in Oklahoma, which killed hundreds of people. Almost every U.S. home was following with excitement the pronouncement of the final death sentence. What does that mean? That the public desire to participate in the justice system is still alive and that the state wants to get support from the people in distributing justice or maybe even to increase its authority and its meaning in people's eyes. However, the realization of the death sentences is still not part of the show. It is well known though that there is no beating or torture but calm 'humane' just taking of life through electric shock or through some kinds of drugs. Again killing without observable physical damages is preferred; in any case the 'just' punishment's damages are not shown on the screens.

### **Other's violence on screens**

There is also another tendency. The TV-screens and the newspapers are preoccupied with showing all possible suffering which may be caused by natural disasters or by wars. Recent examples are the conflicts in Rwanda and in former Yugoslavia. About Rwanda we heard little and NATO did not start a human rights war there. With regard to Yugoslavia all the press was covered with reports of horrible physical abuses, rapes of women, cutting of bodies, mainly the final dead state of the bodies, not the acts themselves. However, what is shown are not disasters caused by U.S. forces, neither in Yugoslavia nor now in Afghanistan. When the U.S. starts a war it is said that unfortunately there will be some *casualties* but if another country has problems and conflicts it is talked about *massacre*. In an article about the Taliban from the 17<sup>th</sup> of October (LA Times) the word 'massacre' was repeated 18 times. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October I read in the Santa Barbara News-Press (I had already read that in Swedish and Bulgarian newspapers on the WWW) that the bombs killed 200 people in an

Afghan village but the reporter immediately added that the information was not independently confirmed. However the reporter did not say what is the answer of the U.S. military on this topic. In fact the U.S. military was called to appear in the international court in Hague and to be tried for war crimes during the war with Yugoslavia (where numerous missile 'mistakes' killed many civilians and ruined homes, historical treasures, and hospitals). The U.S. threatened that if this is done they will stop paying their debts to the UN. I haven't met an American who knows about that either. Does it mean that if not mentioned in the U.S. then it hasn't happened? Why, why aren't U.S. ever responsible for their own massacres?

### **Virtuality of empathy or charity as entertainment**

Today, the media helps us to overcome hills and mountains and oceans, we can 'see' and in a virtual way witness what is going on and because of the virtuality of the contact with other's suffering we don't have to be afraid of them either. It is also easy to give the charity in the form of money, which do or do not reach, help or not the suffering. The latest charitable donation was the throwing of food boxes at the same places where bombs are thrown, which reminds of the chocolates given by Nazi soldiers to Ukraine kids. Does it mean that such acts make us less indifferent, more compassionate, and more ethical? Three important points here.

First, western civilization people give the virtual charity while they are entertained. There is a concert, color, dance, a feast and that is how the suffering is dressed for the charitable audience. It is save, fun, easy, and speedy to be charitable. In fact, charity is an industry. Not to mention the number of 'happenings' where well known Hollywood stars read stories of real suffering people, then follow the banquets, the dinners, the celebrity glamour. Compassion is fun to show, to do. There are significantly less fun-events in charity directed to WTC than to other countries though.

Second, the speed is important. One can be compassionate and help but easily and quickly. What is the most precious thing we have and thus can give? Money? Because time is money? But this saying totally disturbs the priorities. In difference from money, which can circulate, can increase, and can be earned more and more, time only flies away and can never be returned. So in the act of donations people save the most precious, the time and give the most impressions, the money. When it comes to the tragedy in New York people give much more of their time than for any other disaster.

Third, the virtuality of the information, the visions, and the experiences of other's suffering prompts us to act because we have no excuse of not knowing but at the same time distances us from the reality of the body suffering. We have even less chance to feel the feelings of others, we can only assume them, imagine them, and since we are in a completely different environment, let's say in a nice home, or on a covered with food table it is not even desirable or possible for us to really feel the hunger, the pain, the despair of the people walking next to or in horse carriages on muddy roads. We can only feel the silent guilt of the impossibility to feel real compassion and this is what the charity concerts with their obligatory fun satisfy. It is indeed the virtuality

of the information and the virtuality of the experience of the images that paralyze the real feeling of empathy.

### **The limits of compassion**

The desire to give justice and show the 'right' thing to do is universal but the compassion seems to be limited by the national borders. It is much easier to feel compassion for the suffering in New York than it is to feel for the suffering in other countries, such as Afghanistan. Suffering caused by the U.S. forces is not shown on TV, not talked about or heavily doubted. The compassion for them is immediately turned to money or save-taxes clear-the-backyard donations. The hegemony has reached its limits: it is OK to cause pain and it is OK to relieve it. The display of compassion comes before the feeling of compassion. It is the demonstrability of the compassion and the need of demonstration, which precedes the feeling. Compassion is not possible without the acceptance of Otherness. Acceptance of Otherness is not possible if one feels to be the owner of truth, the superior better because this leads to imposition of values, which cancels the Otherness. The primarily demonstrated compassion has two related motives: to satisfy the feeling of guilt and to deny the Otherness. This creates a monologicistic (cf. Bauman) society which hears, feels nothing else but itself. However, the I can not exist without the Other. In trying to do that such an I or such a monologicistic society goes into a desperate state of loneliness and fear. This fear and isolation can create only more violence, more suffering, more perfunctory compassion, more guilt, more monologism, more fear, more violence, more suffering, more ...

### **The ethical person**

The Jewish thinker Martin Buber who is the main inspiration for the post-modern call for ethics starts his well-known book "I-Thou" like that: "The basic word is the word pair I-Thou. The other basic word is the word pair I-It". The first one is the essence of the ethical being; it is relational and dialogical by nature. The I-Thou relation exists when there is no imposition, when the Thou is not treated as an object, as a lower form of being, as an It, but as an Other, as a different Other, whose Otherness is sacred for the I.

In his beautiful book "Postmodern Ethics" Zigmund Bauman continues Buber's work and writes among other things about the escaping motivations and the unbearable silence of responsibility. The ethical person, he says, is ethical because he/she is constantly followed by the suspicion that he/she is not sufficiently ethical (p.115). The saints are saints because they do not hide behind the law. In this context he quotes a relevant piece of the wise Talmudic script 'Trumot' (8:10) (translated from Bulgarian - BM).

"Ula bar Koshev was wanted by the government. He ran away and was hiding at the rabbi Joshua ben Levi in Lod. The government powers came and surrounded the town. They said: "If you don't hand him in we will destroy the town." Rabbi Joshua went to Ula bar Koshev and convinced him to surrender. Ilia was appearing before

to rabbi Joshua but from that moment on he stopped. Rabbi Joshua fasted for many days and at the end Ilia appeared in front of him. "Do I have to appear to informers?" - he asked. Rabbi Joshua said: "I followed the law." Ilia answered: "But is law for saints?"

The saints are saints because they feel or know that no law can cancel the ethical obligation to follow the consequences of the being-for-the-other to the radical choice between life and death, comments Bauman. The only way one can be ethical in a mundane world is by setting an impossible standard because the ethical person can never be content by reaching any standard. **The ethical person "can never be relieved by self-assurances or other people's assurances that the standard is reached. The lack of self-satisfaction and the indignation of yourself which it brings out are the strongest fortress of ethics."** (Bauman p. 116, translation-BM)

In the above saga the government has set a standard and the rabbi complied with the standard thus he limited the ethical by adapting to a set standard. Now if the government is the U.S. and the rabbi are the Taliban what is happening right now is that these religious people are not accepting a forced standard (although the way news are presented today it seems as if the Taliban and the Afghan people are the hijackers and the Anthrax terrorists, look at the front page of Santa Barbara News-Press from 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2001).

The majority of the U.S. population on the other hand is completely self-content and feels no indignation with regard to the violence with which the U.S. government acts. Thus ethics here is low, in fact it is handed in to the law, which is evident also of the huge number of lawsuits in this country (70% of the news in a random newspaper before 11<sup>th</sup> of September included the word 'court'). The individuals and their consciousness can rest in peace because the responsibility for the other is taken from them and delivered by something else. The personal ethical responsibility has disappeared and we can hear it proclaimed especially actively right now "America is the best!" As if U.S. is identical to the whole American continent! The standard is given; its only borders are the national borders, which are obviously not even clear. This self-content gives people the feeling that they have the right to impose their standards to others, because they are the best, the right, the good, for all people. At that stage they have lost sense of ethics, of Otherness, and of the being-for-the-other because in the process the Other has disappeared, there is only the I, nation-based I. There is no dialogue with the Other because there is no Other. In the best case the Other is described as an uncivilized rat hiding in caves or as disease cells. Degraded the Other is simply a malfunction of the I. This is the death of ethical existence. No surprise the U.S. people today are shaking with fear by the horrors in the thrillers eagerly propagated by their complacent democratic hegemonic freedom of speech but no "freedom from speech".

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