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BOOK REVIEW

The Horror, the Horror!

Adriana Cavarero 2009. *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence.*
New York: Columbia University Press, 168 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-231-14456-8.

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The famous last words of Kurtz ("The Horror, The Horror!") in Conrad's "The Heart of Darkness" point to the importance of horror not easily discernible in traditional concepts. This kind of horror and its centrality to contemporary practices of violence form the focus of the latest book by Adriana Cavarero, one of Italy's most important political philosophers and world-renowned feminist theorist.

In the present era of global war against terrorism traditional ways to understand violence have become more or less obsolete. Wars are no longer declared but military operations continue to produce havoc and misery. Terrorist acts continue to kill and maim people who are not participating in a war in a traditional sense. The old view of war as nothing more than a duel writ large has grown especially obsolete as "wars" demand proportionally more civilian casualties than ever before. Although the advances in military technology could basically reduce the amount of "collateral damage", this has not happened. On the contrary, also civilian targets are more easily destroyed with precision and the causing of larger and larger damage becomes all the time more easy. The old adage that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter points to the fact that acts of violence in them-

selves can have different meanings when we adopt the viewpoint of the perpetrators of violent acts. Abandoning the warrior's viewpoint, Cavarero explores these acts instead from the viewpoint of the victims. From the victim's viewpoint, the morality of the act changes: the end melts away, the rhetorical masquerade of collateral damage vanishes, and the carnage itself becomes the only substantial matter.

Cavarero's book is an attempt to re-conceptualize contemporary violence that assumes forms unseen and unheard-of and that becomes more and more difficult to name in existing vocabulary. Lexical constellation revolving around contemporary conflicts partly constructs those conflicts, as the practices of naming supply events with interpretative frameworks and guide public opinion. Linguistic practices thus constitute an integral part of the conflicts and in this sense terms like "war" and "terrorism" are largely bereft of any descriptive meaning and confuse the real-life situation rather than offer tools for analyzing it. "Humanitarian wars" and "war on terrorism" pose a challenge for the lexicon of modernity which reserves the label enemy for states alone and regards war as an inter-state activity. Given this obsolescence of concepts and vagueness of terms like terrorism, Cavarero coins a new term, "horrorism", to describe the more ontological and fundamental offence of disfiguration and massacre.

This little "counter-history" of the helpless victims has, according to Cavarero, a specific vocabulary of its own, one that has been known for millenia. The name used for these acts ranging from biblical descriptions of the slaughter of innocents to Auschwitz is "horror", instead of "war" or "terrorism", and it points primarily to crime rather than strategy of politics. Adding a feminist perspective to the debate, Cavarero highlights certain novelty in regard to contemporary mass killers. Women turned into human bombs and uniformed women torturing prisoners conjure up the ancient female face of Medusa as the mythical face of horror. Also, the icon of the repugnant crime against helpless has, for ages, been the infanticidal woman, Medea.

Cavarero discusses the theme with a wide variety of sources, ranging from ancient authors like Pindar and Hesiod to theoreticians like Schmitt and Arendt. Also Bataille and the eroticization of violent acts, as well as Susan Sontag's ideas on photography in this respect, receive a noteworthy discussion in Cavarero's book. Many of these theoretical "roots" of the book are highly interesting and especially the discussion on Schmitt's "Theory of the Partisan" as a theoretical prelude for

present global warfare merits a mention. With great erudition Cavarero traces the foundations of horrorism from the Homeric staging of battles to Clausewitz and present military operations. She also analyses horror and violence towards helpless victims as a kind of drastic negation of (maternal) care.

Cavarero's discussions for example on the warriors' pleasures or on Bataille's perverse interweaving of theoretical density and morbid attraction for bloodshed are illuminating on the level of the individual perpetrator. But also the discussions on war and terrorism are innovative, as she makes the distinction more or less from the viewpoint of the victims. Wars can sometimes kill defenseless – and they nowadays increasingly do as the percentage of civilian victims from all victims has risen to 90 in recent operations – but modern terrorism tends to kill exclusively defenseless people. The age of globalization has normalized the exceptional and made horrorism ubiquitous, as every person on the planet is a potential target of the looming arbitrary destruction. Whoever the victims are, they are as good as the next one from the viewpoint of the terrorist, and thus the distinction between innocent and guilty, between civilian and soldier, loses significance. Modern terrorism is no longer terrorism, as it has perfected the global indiscriminate violence to a level where the violent acts do not serve any political goal or a strategy. More accurately, the means of terrorism have become the end in itself, and the kind of horror Conrad described derives precisely from the self-referential valence of this destructive process. The randomness and helplessness of the victims gives a good reason to side-step from the language of terrorism and call it horrorism instead.

Following Cavarero's argument we could ask, given that it is precisely the fear of violent death in the Hobbesian discourse that lays the foundations of the body politic and its practices, wouldn't this change to ever present possibility of unstoppable and arbitrary destruction change also the theoretical framework of modern politics? States can no longer maintain even their very basic functions as they cannot protect their citizens from external or internal threats and consequently also their legitimacy might wither away. While the language of war has been tied to state level actors, it is easy too see how changes in this discourse could easily lead to more profound theoretical and practical changes. The modern terrorist does not tremble in the Hobbesian fear

of violent death and can thus resist the zoological-political regimentation and disdain the urge for security that the state uses to dominate citizens. The perpetrator is thus more reminiscent of a Jüngerian or Schmittian rebel, to some extent immune to traditional political concerns. In the traditional Hobbesian sense terror is essential for the state, whereas the liberal democratic narrative has instead established itself as the sole alternative to the alleged terror that characterizes the so-called despotic regimes. Liberal democratic state appears as the negation of state terror, which has been nominally expelled and turned as an attribute of illegitimate governments. But this excommunication of terror from the state is not easily achieved in the present world because terror/horror continues in different forms.

The studies on terrorism have highlighted a rather complex constellation of religious and political ideas, economic and geopolitical concerns, and individual ambitions behind the terrorist acts. In Cavarero's view, however, these acts aim in the current context to produce a different form of domination on a global scale while simultaneously the state is undergoing a process of disaggregation. Cavarero's perspective, looking at the situation from the viewpoint of the helpless victims, leads to a conclusion that horror appears more conspicuous and applicable to present day situation than terror. However, we should also keep in mind that because reality is often opaque and resists strict dichotomization, we cannot always say who is innocent, who is guilty, who is helpless, and who is a victim. Therefore, declaring oneself as a victim also continues to be a viable political strategy occasionally.