

Book Reviews

Cavarero, Adriana. 2009. Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence. Trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. 154. ISBN: 0231144563

How to name the constellation of violence, power and resistance that characterizes the contemporary political scene? Are the traditional political categories sufficient for a representation of our contemporaneity? Can the language of this tradition aptly describe and interpret what is happening today? These questions inform Adriana Cavarero's new book and lead her to attempt a renaming of the phenomenon of contemporary violence. Language, in fact, has proven unable to renew itself in order to represent, and thus comprehend, the global carnage that stains the beginning of the twenty-first century; indeed, she writes, "it tends to mask it" (2). In the twentieth century violence spread and assumed unheard-of forms, and since September 11, 2001, it marks the global everyday life in a way that escapes the old interpretive frameworks. We have no words to describe a form of violence that strikes everywhere, at any time, and mainly defenceless civilians: the concepts from the past, like *war* or *terrorism* misleadingly confine this violence into categories unable to represent the new. Linguistic innovation becomes therefore imperative and Cavarero proposes to situate the new phenomenon in the semantic field of *horror*: the neologism "horrorism," apart from the obvious assonance with the word *terrorism*, is meant to emphasize "the peculiarly repugnant character of so many scenes of contemporary violence" (29). In an analysis that spans from Greek mythology, through the main political thinkers of modernity like Hobbes, Schmitt, Foucault and Arendt, the horrors of Auschwitz and Bataille's eroticization of violence, Primo Levi and Joseph Conrad, to suicide bombers and the tortures at Abu Grahیب, Cavarero unravels the roots, iconography and poignant actuality of contemporary "horrorism."

This renaming entails primarily a change of perspective: from the traditional viewpoint – what Cavarero names the "perspective" or "criterion of the warrior" – the new form of violence remains incomprehensible and unrepresentable. It is the defenceless person without qualities, blown up by suicide bombers, bombed by unmanned aircrafts, tortured, raped, displaced, confined into camps, who takes the centre of the contemporary stage, and it is only from her perspective – the "criterion of the defenceless" – that the phenomenon must be named and described. It makes no longer sense, for example, to discuss war in terms of regulated conflicts between states and the classical model of a clash between men in uniform. From its first account in the Homeric battle, this model entail reciprocal, symmetrical violence, and not unilateral violence inflicted upon the defenceless. *Reciprocity* is its fundamental principle, and terror is its essence. From at least the Armenian genocide and World War I, war has become not only asymmetrical, but "consists predominantly of the homicide, unilateral and sometimes planned, of the defenceless" (62). When most of the 'casualties' of war are helpless civilians, it is impossible and senseless to ignore their point of view and still entrust the meaning of war and its horror to the perspective of the warrior. It makes no sense to insist on the criterion of the regularity of combatants, when the victims of any war are now civilians by a wide majority. Carl Schmitt attempted a redefinition of modern war and the concept of enemy in his *Theory of the Partisan*, but in order to 'update' the criterion of the warrior, and certainly not to reverse it. It is equally senseless, today, to

separate strategy and goals, means and ends: from the point of view of the helpless victim, “the end melts away, and the means becomes substance” (1). It is precisely this distinction that opens the book: two scenes of massacre, a suicide attack in Baghdad in July 2005 and the American bombing of a wedding feast in Iraq in May 2004, a ‘mistake,’ are inserted, from the perspective of the warrior, in a narrative that finally justifies the massacre either as part of a strategy to achieve ‘higher ends’ (as deplorable as they may be) or as ‘collateral damage,’ deplored but inevitable facts of war. It is only from the perspective of the helpless victims that this narrative can be shown not only to be hollow and ambiguous, but to provide the linguistic justification of what can only be described as “crime” (3). It is the horror of the scene that stands out, and from this horror a new conceptual and political framework must arise.

In the age of the ‘war on terror,’ the distinction between war and terrorism is a crucial problem: within the traditional framework, terrorism is defined as a criminal form of violence, whose actors, aims and acts are incompatible with the traditional system of destruction. The terrorist is no regular combatant who directs its fire against other combatants, hitting civilians only by mistake: to kill civilian is today most often the goal. This framework functions of course in the discourse of politicians and the media as a legitimization of ‘just,’ ‘preventive,’ or even ‘humanitarian’ wars, and it is certainly not oblivious of the enormity and suffering of civilian victims. These, however, are given neither a place that accounts for their status nor a voice to represent it. Cavarero emphasizes then that, though the label ‘terrorism’ functions as an umbrella concept which groups a plethora of historical phenomena, and though all these phenomena are characterized by the massacre of the defenceless, it is only in today’s development that the weapon becomes the body of a suicide. The *terror* becomes thus *horror*. The terror which characterizes contemporary violence has lost its goals and thus cannot be defined as strategic. The fact that the weapon becomes the body itself is not only scandalous, but, from the point of view of today’s technological imaginary of war, irregular, illegitimate and also unfair. Not only there is no longer symmetry between combatants, but there isn’t even any battle. The omnipotent dreams of military hypertechnology and the very concept of war the regular combatants still maintain they are fighting, shine for their emptiness. The enemy itself has become an indistinct, phantom-like shadow, indistinguishable and unrepresentable. And torture, as epitomized by the pictures of Abu Ghahib, reveals the mere horrorist face of a violence devoid, in both camps, of any goal or strategy. Finally, the figure of the victim has grown global: victim can be anyone at all, an indiscriminate and random ‘casualty.’ The old framework is, therefore, not only extremely ambiguous, but its argumentation never goes so far as to embrace radically the criterion of the defenceless.

Horror is not, of course, a novelty in the universal history of violence, and Cavarero goes a long way to retrace its semantic and iconographic roots in Greek mythology – a trademark of her writing. This etymological operation responds to a two-fold strategy: firstly, it allows Cavarero to make a clear distinction between ‘horror’ and ‘terror,’ between their characters and manifestations and their effects on the body. Whereas ‘terror’ derives from the Greek and Latin verb *tremo* and connotes a fear that “acts immediately on the body, making it tremble and compelling it to take flight” (4), ‘horror’ comes from *horreo* and denotes primarily a state of paralysis, which excludes the moment of flight. Violent death is part of the picture, but not the central part: “There is no question of evading death. In contrast to what occurs with terror, in horror there is no instinctive

movement of flight in order to survive" (8). Moreover, if 'terror' is unequivocally related to fear and fright, 'horror' has more to do with repugnance, a repugnance that is mainly related to the sight of a dismembered body. Horror denotes a scene unbearable to look at, like that of bodies that blow themselves up in order to tear other bodies apart, dismembering their own individuality and that of their victims. Contemporary violence – and this is the second point – has taken such a form that mainly attacks the integrity of the human body – suicide bombers, beheadings, mutilations, torture – and thus escapes the traditional vocabulary of war based rather on the semantics and 'physics' of terror. It is the terminological constellation of horror, Cavarero argues, that we need to use in order to describe and comprehend this new form of violence.

The excursus into Greek mythology allows her to make another point: in the iconography of the misogynist, patriarchal West, it is two feminine figures, Medusa and Medea, which epitomize horror. Medusa, the Gorgon whose gaze could petrify and was finally beheaded by Perseus, and Medea, wife of Jason, who first killed and dismembered her brother and then killed her two children in revenge for Jason's betrayal: "Horror has the face of a woman" (14). The severed head of Medusa symbolizes not only the unwatchable dismemberment of the body, but also the horror of the separation of the female head from the uterus and its reproductive function, to which the patriarchal narrative relegates women. Medea, killing her children, emphasizes not only the horror of a violence inflicted to the helpless *par excellence*, but also the horror of a woman that renounces her stereotypical reproductive function and gives death instead of life. If men remain unchallenged protagonists in every theatre of violence, "when a woman steps onto the stage the scene turns darker" (14). The horror of contemporary female 'terrorists' and female suicide bombers – some even pregnant – evokes these two figures of the patriarchal iconography, but simultaneously also disarranges the gender dynamics of the traditional (male) imaginary of war and violence, and emphasizes once again the insufficiency of its categorical framework.

The fact that it is the very singularity of the victim that becomes accidental spells out the fundamental issue that the criterion of the helpless identifies: the superfluity of the human being. Horrorist violence, by tearing furiously at the body, works not simply to take away its life, but to "undo its figural unity" and thus emphasizes that it is the uniqueness of the person that is being attacked (15). In other words, this is a violence that goes beyond death and whose goal is not much death but the destruction of human singularity in its ontological dignity. Its figure is in fact the severed head of Medusa, epitome of a body dismembered, undone and disfigured, and thus attacked in its irremediable incarnated singularity. Most repugnant than any other body part is the severed head, the most markedly human of the remains, on which the singular face can still be seen: "Medusa alludes to a human essence that, deformed in its very being, contemplates the unprecedented act of its own dehumanization. The quintessence of an incarnated uniqueness that, in expressing itself, exposes itself, the severed head is the symbol of that which extreme violence has chosen for its object" (16). This body is unwatchable and arises instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body: "What is at stake is not the end of a human life but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies" (8). A clear example is modern beheading: the crime is staged as an intentional offense to the ontological dignity of the victim. The question is not so much killing but rather "dehumanizing and savaging the body as

body, destroying it in its figural unity, sully it" (9). And this extreme violence, directed at nullifying human beings even more than at killing them, relies on the semantics of horror rather than that of terror. What this violence really perpetrates, therefore, is an "ontological crime," one whose "precise aim is to erase singularity" (19), one whose goal is the killing of uniqueness.

The slaughter of the defenceless is not a specialty of modernity, but the history of the twentieth century stages the ontological crime in forms and proportions never achieved before. Beginning with the genocide of the Armenians in 1915-1916 and the unheard-of carnage of World War I, the "short century" takes the killing of uniqueness to organisational and technological perfection. The apex – though sure enough not the last instance – of horrorism was reached with the Nazi death camps. Auschwitz epitomizes this horror insofar as it construed a system for the fabrication of the degenerated helpless person and thus constitutes an "exercise of demolition of the human being" (36). Cavarero reads Primo Levi's poignant pages on his experience in the camp through the theoretical lens of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in order to emphasize that what the camp really epitomizes is an attack on the ontological status of the human being: it systematically aims at transforming unique beings into a mass of superfluous, impersonal beings whose murder is so impersonal that "also takes away from them their own death" (43). This system is finally paradoxical because its end-product is the *Muselmann*, the human reduced to 'bare life,' no longer exposed to offence because by now incapable of suffering, and thus no longer vulnerable: "they can no longer even feel the hurt of the *vulnus* that nevertheless continues to be inflicted on them with methodical perseverance" (34). The *Muselmann*, the outmost figure of almost grotesque helplessness, is paradoxically *invulnerable*, she signifies a stage of so extreme defencelessness that even vulnerability has been taken away from it. The emphasis is here, however, not on the question of *zoé*, *bios* or 'bare life,' but rather on the ontological dimension and significance of the system: "Extreme horror [...] has to do with the human condition as such" (43). The violence of the Lager is essentially aimed at "fabricating a victim, insensitive by now to the *vulnus*, in whom the human dignity of the defenceless degenerates into a caricature of itself" (36). The issue is therefore, Cavarero insists, not only ethical or political, but involves first and foremost the question of ontology: it is human nature as singular, unique and incarnated body, that is concerned.

This is a concern that Cavarero, with Arendt, carries to a wider philosophical level. The attack on singularity as the ontological dignity of the human being is in fact, according to Arendt, what characterizes the history of Western philosophy, which sacrificed human plurality on the altar of the absolutisation of the One. Ignoring men in flesh and blood, and thus erasing their uniqueness, particularity and finitude, the philosophical tradition fabricated a series of abstract 'fictitious entities' which finally made the concrete human being 'superfluous.' And the idea of the superfluity of the singular is what informs the horror of so many forms of politics. Nazism, in sum, put into operation what philosophy had only thought, and 'fabricated' the superfluity of human beings. This notion of the superfluity of the individual also informs Georges Bataille's eroticisation of violence, and since many suggestions arising from his work still burden the contemporary understanding of violence – Cavarero cites as an example James Hillman's 2004 book *A Terrible Love of War* – Bataille's arguments are thoroughly dissected in the book. The dissolution of the finite into the infinite, erotically enjoyed in cruelty, is the focus of his literary and theoretical constructions: his "sovereign subject" is he who, in

contrast to the servile subject, does not follow the bourgeois principles of utility and self-preservation, but rather those of loss and self-destruction, experiencing full erotic inebriation: “against the instinct of self-preservation seen as an act wherein the I closes in on itself, it is the death wish that defines the liberty of the sovereign soul” (51). The gallery of this enthusiastic dissolution of the ‘I’ is the horror house of Bataille’s imaginary: bodies raped, flayed, dismembered, whose disfigurement ruptures the boundaries and nullifies the singularity of the human being. There is, significantly, no *reciprocity* in this relation to the other, but most of all what this erotic deindividuation shuts off is the vision of the fundamental alternative that vulnerability offers, that between wound and care.

The criterion of the helpless, in fact, not only provides the theoretical instruments to describe and represent contemporary violence, but also functions as ethical and political standpoint. A trademark of Cavarero’s thought is her relying on an ontology of uniqueness and exposure that she derives from Arendt and then develops and combines with the feminist reflection known as *pensiero della differenza sessuale* (theory of sexual difference). In *Horrorism*, this ontology is developed along the lines of Judith Butler’s reflections on “vulnerability” in *Precarious Life*. Vulnerability is one of the constitutive characters of a unique being exposed to the other: “The uniqueness that characterizes the ontological status of humans is also [...] a constitutive vulnerability, especially when understood in corporeal terms” (20). To be unique means to be exposed to the other and to consign one’s singularity to this exposure. The human, unique being is vulnerable by definition. The condition of vulnerability presents an essential alternative which moves between the two poles of wounding and caring: “Inasmuch as vulnerable, exposed to the other, the singular body is irremediably open to both responses” (20). For Butler, Cavarero emphasizes, vulnerability configures a human condition in which it is the relation to the other that counts and puts to the fore an ontology of linkage and dependence. Recognizing our common condition of vulnerability calls for a collective responsibility. This move entails a rejection of the autonomous sovereign subject of the Western philosophical and political tradition, which, like the sovereign state to which it corresponds, thinks of itself as closed and self-sufficient: against the individualistic modern ontology, which refuses to admit dependency and relationship, Butler emphasizes that the ‘I’ is not closed but rather open and exposed. And this exposure consigns primarily the subject to the *vulnus*, to the alternative between the wound that the other can inflict and the care that the other can provide. The vulnerable being “exists totally in the tension generated by this alternative” (30).

Cavarero points out, however, that ‘vulnerability’ is not a synonymous of ‘helplessness.’ The human being is vulnerable as a singular body exposed to the wounding. Yet, there is nothing necessary in this vulnerability, only the contingent potential for the wound. “As a body, the vulnerable one remains vulnerable as long as she lives, exposed at any instant to the *vulnus*” (30). ‘Helpless’ presents a different and stronger connotation: the Italian word employed by Cavarero, and that the English translator chose to render indifferently as “helpless” or “defenceless,” is *inerme*, which etymologically means ‘unarmed,’ he who does not bear arms and thus cannot harm, kill or wound. In everyday use the term tends to designate a person who, attacked, has no arms with which to defend themselves. To be defenceless means to be in the power of the other and thus entails a condition of substantial passivity. The relation is unilateral, there is no reciprocity, no symmetry, no parity. The exemplary case is the infant: the defence-

lessness of a baby does not depend on circumstances, but is a condition, the essential mode in which the human being comes into the world and, for a certain period, inhabits it. Infancy is the span of time in which vulnerability and helplessness are completely conjoined: “Though she remains vulnerable as long as she lives, from the first to the last day of her singular existence, an adult falls back into defencelessness only in certain circumstances. She is always vulnerable but only sometimes helpless, as contingency dictates and with a variable degree of intensity” (30-1). In the infant, the relation takes the form of unilateral exposure: “The vulnerable being is here the absolutely exposed and helpless one who is awaiting care and has no means to defend itself against wounding. Its relation to the other is a total consignment of its corporeal singularity in a context that does not allow for reciprocity” (21). It is precisely the thematisation of infancy that allows the vulnerable being to be read in terms of a drastic alternative between violence and care: the other, embodied here by the mother, cannot limit the care to a mere refraining from wounding, but, by necessity, “the vulnerability of the infant always summons her active involvement” (24). The infant thus proclaims relationship as a human condition not just fundamental, but structurally necessary.

The gloomy landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first century has transformed the contingency of helplessness into necessity: the circumstances that produce helplessness have dilated into the indeterminacy of a space and a time corresponding to “the everyday dimension of the everywhere” (75). More than circumstances, we can speak of an ongoing condition which makes vulnerability coincide with helplessness: “Exposed unilaterally to the *vulnus*, the defenceless are the targets of a violent death that surpasses the event, atrocious in itself, of death, because it has degraded each of them beforehand from singular being to random being” (76). Therefore, the viewpoint of the defenceless, Cavarero argues, must be adopted *exclusively*: not merely as the only perspective from which contemporary violence can be really named, represented and understood, but also that from which subjectivity, relationality, ethics and politics must be rethought.

Carlo Salzani

Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

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The concept of constitutional patriotism is not Jürgen Habermas’s, even if it has come to be associated with his version of the post-national state. The term itself, as Jan-Werner Müller points out in this important work, was not coined by Habermas, but by Dolf Sternberger, a student of Hannah Arendt, to describe the ideal relationship between the German state and its citizens in the 1970s.

The idea, as Müller traces its history, begins with Karl Jaspers’s *The Question of German Guilt*. While Jaspers rejected the idea that the German people were collectively guilty, he believed nonetheless that they were in some way collectively responsible for the Holocaust. This was not necessarily a negative outcome: if the German people shouldered that responsibility – a responsibility for the worst criminal act in history – “a negative past could become a source of social cohesion” (16). While constitutional patriotism shares similar characteristics to other methods of achieving social cohesion, such as a shared national narrative (characteristics such as a concern with memory and militancy), it differs from them by emphasizing a different social imaginary (in this