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# **Excluded From the World of Men**

**Dehumanisation of Victims and Perpetrators in the  
Genocidal Context**

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## **Abstract**

Dealing with the issue of dehumanisation in the genocidal context, the thesis will try to demonstrate that this psychological manoeuvre, by depriving a targeted group of people of their humanity, disengages the morality of perpetrators and largely facilitates the perpetration of the most heinous human rights violations. The work will firstly define what dehumanisation means, with a particular focus on its role in the genocidal process. Consequently the mechanisms that allow dehumanisation to occur will be considered, focusing on the dehumanising features of the genocidal ideology and resorting to the Moral Disengagement Theory by Bandura and the Neutralisation Theory by Sykes and Matza. The thesis will then address the dehumanisation at work, investigating how the process impacts the language, the images and also the physical treatment to which the dehumanised group is subjected. Furthermore the dehumanisation of perpetrators will be addressed, interpreting the process as an interpersonal phenomenon that affects all the involved parties. The work will be concluded with some remarks on the need to rehumanise both victims and perpetrators in the wake of mass atrocities. The aim of my research is to explore the issue from a wide perspective and critically reflect on it. I will draw upon different fields of knowledge, especially resorting to socio-psychological, philosophical and criminological approaches.

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*“(...) a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete  
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air  
he plays with his vipers and daydreams  
der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland  
dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith”.*

Todesfuge- Paul Celan<sup>1</sup>

***To the ashen haired Shulamith,  
whose grave is in the air.***

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<sup>1</sup> Celan, *Die Todesfuge*, published in 1948, English translation available online at: <http://www.celan-projekt.de/todesfuge-englisch.html>.





# Excluded from the world of men

## Dehumanisation of victims and perpetrators in the genocidal context

*“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.*

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 1<sup>2</sup>

*“Because that look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany. (...) The brain which governed those blue eyes and those manicured hands said: 'This something in front of me belongs to a species which it is obviously opportune to suppress'”.*

If This is a Man, Primo Levi<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Art.1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (UDHR), A/RES/217 (III).

<sup>3</sup> Levi, 1959, p. 123.

# Introduction

## 1. A species to suppress

The combination of these quotations may appear quite awkward to the reader. Nevertheless it is linked to the challenging reasoning on the nature of human rights that constitutes the basis of this research. Human rights are proclaimed as rights universally belonging to all human beings. The first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (hereafter “the Declaration”) entails that all human beings should enjoy the same innate freedom and equality while acting fraternally towards one another. This statement constitutes the founding principle of the human rights regime and the following articles in the Declaration express certain basic rights guaranteed to all individuals just because they are human. Besides their theoretical proclamation and, on the other side, the endless struggle for their actual worldwide attainment, there is something even more problematic to take into consideration while considering their aspired universality: the troublesome issue is not only about the content of the human rights standards, but also the subjects to whom these rights belong.

The logical connection between “humanity” and the entitlement to fundamental rights seems, at first glance, rather self-evident and indisputable: being human is obviously a prerequisite for the acknowledgement of human rights. Consequently, it is possible to declare, at least at a theoretical level, that these rights should universally belong to all human beings. However, let us suppose the existence of a being in whom we would not recognise reason and conscience and the other human qualities. In this case, would that being be entitled to the rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration? Unfortunately, this is not merely a debatable speculation and this circumstance leads me directly to the second excerpt taken from one of the masterpieces of Holocaust literature, *If This is a Man*. This intense testimony has been written by the Italian scientist and writer Primo Levi who survived Auschwitz. At one point, Levi reminds the

Nazi engineer, Doktor Pannwitz, who tested the scientific expertise of the prisoner in order to select him for the Chemical Kommando. The writer describes that the gaze the man gave him “ was not a look between two men”: Pannwitz does not recognise Levi as a creature belonging to the same humanity he belongs to. He is not a human being at all for the Nazi scientist. On the contrary the “Hebrew” that is in front of him represents the embodiment of a “species which it is obviously opportune to suppress”.

## **2. Dehumanisation: The Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse**

Doktor Pannwitz denies Levi' s humanity. This denial of humanity to other people is called dehumanisation and it means to judge other individuals to be not-human. Every human society has a certain tendency to dehumanise specific groups as will be defined later in the first chapter. However, in the context of the most heinous human rights violations, dehumanisation plays a crucial role. The humanity of the victims is, in fact, preventively denied by the perpetrators in order to facilitate the massacre. This is especially the case with genocidal crimes, which target entire “peoples”. By denying the belonging to humanity of a target group, in fact, the victimisers don't have any moral constraints toward that people. Since they are not human, there is no need to treat them “humanely”: human rights simply do not apply to non-human beings. Dehumanisation thus offers an effective instrument to remove any moral concern in the perpetrators by denying the humanity of the victims and eases, for this reason, the carrying out of all the most shocking mass violences.

Notwithstanding the fact that humanity should not rely upon an external and conditional attribution, dehumanisation entails the possibility to deny the humanity of certain individuals- of a whole group- putting them aside of the “universal” recognition of human rights. For this reason, mass crimes involving the dehumanisation of victims and especially genocide, constitute as Arendt said a deliberate “attack on human diversity as such, that is upon a characteristic of the human status, without which the very word mankind or humanity would be devoid of meaning<sup>4</sup>”. Being an outrage to

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4 Arendt, 1965, p.269.

each person's status as human, they can be considered crimes against every human being on earth. Considering the number of people killed and the wide harm caused, mass violences are the most destructive agents of misery and pain in the world<sup>5</sup>. Due to the involved dehumanisation, that always plays a role in their perpetration, they represent, according to Kelman, a crime that lies far beyond the realm of moral discourse<sup>6</sup>: "for that reason this sickness of the soul might well be called the 'Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse'<sup>7</sup>" and constitutes an insidious threat for human-kind as a whole.

The latter thus raises important questions: how is it possible to deny the humanity of a fellow human being? What does it mean to dehumanise? What is the link between dehumanisation and mass atrocities? How does dehumanisation work and how does it concretely impact the victims? Are the perpetrators also affected by this process? How is it possible to rebuild an overturned society without taking into account the necessary rehumanisation of the parties? I will explore these crucial issues throughout the remnant of the paper.

Moving from my initial question- how is it possible to deny the humanity of a fellow human being?- the aim of my research is to explore the role of dehumanisation in the perpetration of the most heinous crimes. Since the fact that this psychological manoeuvre performs the most powerful role in genocide, generally deemed the crime of all crimes, I will investigate dehumanisation in the genocidal context in order to gain a better insight into the dehumanisation process itself. In the first chapter I will address the meaning of dehumanisation and its role in genocide. Consequently, in the second chapter, I will search for more theoretical grounding by addressing the relation between genocidal ideology and dehumanisation as well as the mechanisms through which the morality of perpetrators is disengaged from "inhumane" behaviours. In the third chapter I will move from the theoretical side to the concrete one, considering dehumanisation at work. I will investigate how dehumanisation impacts the victims, focusing on the role of

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5 Kauzlarich in "Victimisation and Supranational Criminology" pp. 435-453 in Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.435.

6 Kelman, 1973, p. 33.

7 Montagu & Matson, 1983,p. xi.

language and other symbolizing means as well as on the relevance of the physical treatment to which the victims are subjected. Afterwards, in the fourth chapter, I will turn my attention to the perpetrators. A comprehensive understanding of the complexities of dehumanisation should, in fact, also encompass the perspective of the victimisers and consider how they are themselves progressively affected by the dehumanisation process. Lastly, in the conclusion, I will briefly reflect on the relevance of the issue and the necessity of a rehumanisation of both victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of the most heinous mass violences.

### 3. Methodological note

Notwithstanding the fact that dehumanisation is relevant in all international crimes as well as other gross human rights violations, in my research I will mainly focus on genocide. Dehumanisation, in fact, appears to be extremely relevant in genocidal contexts if not, as stated by several scholars, a prerequisite for genocide itself<sup>8</sup>.

Genocide is legally defined by article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (CPPCG) as the deliberate destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group<sup>9</sup>. The exhaustive list of the four groups excludes the deliberate destruction and killing of groups other than those enumerated, for instance social, political and economic ones. The definition provided by international law is indisputably unsatisfying, but is evidently a legal instrument resulting from a compromise. However the sociological definition is not subjected to the constraints of the Realpolitik and, from a sociological perspective, genocide and the

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8 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.178. Moreover Alvarez, 2010 and Kelman, 1973.

9 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, (CPPCG), A/RES/260 (III). Art. 2:

“ In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”.

deliberate destruction of a political or social group are identical social phenomena<sup>10</sup>. I will thus not restrict my analysis to the legally defined concept of genocide, resorting to a wider interpretation according to the definition of Chalk and Jonassohn of genocide as “a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator<sup>11</sup>”. As stated by Chalk, in addition to incorporating the social and political groups, this definition emphasizes that the initiative in defining the boundaries and membership of a victim group always lies in the hands of the perpetrator<sup>12</sup>. For this reason, it complies with the premise of this research: humanity should be a universal category applicable to all human beings, but it is instead a social construction. This is particularly evident in the context of genocide, when the denial of humanity to a certain group, depending on the definition of the perpetrators, paves the way for the following atrocities: the perpetrator constructs the victims as belonging to a group which is legitimate “to suppress” and firstly targets their ontological status, then their fundamental rights and finally life itself.

I will therefore consider the intentional destruction of any specific group, including the groups already mentioned by the Convention as well as political, social, economic and possibly other groups excluded by the international treaty and the international criminal tribunals. Moreover, besides the sadly known and recognised genocides, I will also draw upon other cases of mass violence that show an “overall policy that is genocidal in character<sup>13</sup>”. Namely I will resort to sanctioned massacres that took place, to mention Kelman, “in an atmosphere that made clear that the civilian population was expendable and that actions resulting in the indiscriminate killing of civilians were central to the strategy of the war<sup>14</sup>”. Since the fact that the entire class of mass violences share the common features of dehumanisation, I will thus search for insightful perspectives on its role by also considering atrocities committed in the context of crimes of obedience, that is, according to Kelman and Hamilton, crimes performed in response

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10 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.159.

11 Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990, p. 23.

12 Chalk, 1989, p.152.

13 Kelman, 1973, p.31.

14 *Ivi*, p.32.

to orders given by authorities, but considered illegal or immoral by the international community<sup>15</sup>.

The aim of my research is to explore the issue from a wide perspective and critically reflect on it. For this reason I will draw upon different fields of knowledge in the attempt to integrate them, resorting particularly to the socio-psychological, philosophical and criminological approaches. I will refer to a large extent to the socio-psychological work of the Harvard scholar Herbert Kelman and to his reflections on dehumanisation, which supports the elaboration of my theoretical framework. Furthermore I will ground my investigation on the Moral Disengagement Theory elaborated by the psychologist Albert Bandura and on the Violentization Theory framed by Athens. Concerning the philosophical approach, the work of the philosophers David Livingstone Smith and Jonathan Glover constitutes a key reference for my research, especially thanks to their wide sources and testimonies. In relation to the criminological perspective, I will considerably employ the Neutralisation Theory elaborated by Sykes and Matza and developed by Alex Alvarez in the context of supranational criminology. I deduced the examples I refer to throughout the paper from a wide set of sources: from articles which appeared in the newspapers, radio speeches and ideological pamphlets as well as from the survivors' memoirs, interviews or trial testimonies.

I decided to explore the issue of dehumanisation in the context of genocidal and mass violence because I am deeply persuaded of the social relevance that a better understanding of this phenomenon could have. A meaningful comprehension of dehumanisation is not only relevant for the prevention of gross human rights violations, but plays indeed a crucial role in the wake of atrocity. In the aftermath of genocidal violence, traditional measures focus more on the re-establishment of rule of law and rebuilding of destroyed infrastructures. However I am persuaded that it is crucial to deal at the same time with the dehumanisation, turning upside down the process. Rehumanisation of both victims and perpetrators is in fact a key feature to heal post-conflict societies. For this reason, at the end of the present paper, I will briefly reflect on the issue of rehumanisation and on its importance in the transitional context.

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<sup>15</sup> Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 46.





# Chapter I

## Defining Dehumanisation

*“Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name (...) He was paralysed from the waist down, with atrophied legs, thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency: it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgement, which none of us could support, so heavy was it with force and anguish. Hurbinek, who was three years old and perhaps had been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinek, who had fought like a man, to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men, from which a bestial power had excluded him; Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm - even his - bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.”.*

The Reawakening- Primo Levi<sup>16</sup>

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16 Levi, 1995, p. 25-6.

## **1. Excluded from the world of men**

The little Hurbinek only survives in the pages of remembrance of a survivor. He never saw a tree, but his savage and yet human stare continues to judge those that let the crime of all crimes occur, that let this “bestial power” exclude him from the world of men. With the same force and anguish, his memento renews day after day the dreadful, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable question: why? I decided to begin my research with the unbearable glance of Hurbinek because I think it expresses the profound challenge that genocide constitutes to our thinking about human nature and human society from a moral, social and psychological point of view<sup>17</sup>. This “child of nobody, child of Auschwitz” fought to the death to be allowed the entry into the world of men. He fought like a man and still was excluded by other human beings who established for some reasons that he, that all Jews, that Gypsies and homosexuals and mentally ill people and many others were simply not humans. The question that springs to mind is: how is it possible to deny the recognition of humanity to a fellow human being?

To begin my inquiry on the process of dehumanisation in the perpetration of the most heinous crimes, I will firstly address, in this chapter, the meaning of it and its role in genocide. In order to answer this question I will thus reflect on what humanity means, trying to make it insightful, and subsequently explore what it entails to deny humanity. Afterwards, having considered that dehumanisation does not necessarily occur only in societies dominated by structural violence, I will examine in which contexts dehumanisation may ease genocidal violence. To conclude I will focus on the specific role of dehumanisation in the genocidal process. At the end of this chapter, the reader will have a better understanding of how meaningful dehumanisation is in context of genocide.

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<sup>17</sup> Kelman, 1973, p.29.

## 2. Accord humanity and deny it

The whole issue of dehumanisation is founded on the concept of humanity itself and in order to figure out what it means, I need to clarify a set of concepts vital to our understanding: *humanity*, *humanness* and *humankind*.

According to the entry of the Oxford Dictionary of English, the term *humanity*<sup>18</sup> can refer to “the human beings collectively” or “the quality of being human”. The term thus expresses both a set of qualities and a collectivity of beings owning these qualities. To make the reasoning more meaningful in relation to the aim of my research, I will resort to the work of the socio-psychologist Herbert Kelman, Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard University, who provided for an insightful definition of humanity. According to the scholar, to perceive another person as fully human means to accord him or her both identity and community<sup>19</sup>. Identity represents the agentive aspect of humanity and is defined as to perceive a person “as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices and entitled to live his own life on the basis of his own goals and values<sup>20</sup>”. Community, on the other hand, stands for the communal aspect of humanity and means to recognise an individual “as part of an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other, who recognise each other's individuality, and who respect each other's rights<sup>21</sup>”. So what he means to say is that the two concepts, combined, provide that the human being has value in *himself* and is valued by *others*<sup>22</sup>. At the basis of Kelman's concept of identity, there are those human qualities, like the mentioned individuality and independence, that can be said to constitute the fundamental *humanness* of men and women. At the same time, the concept of community entails the belonging to an “interconnected network of individuals” that can be defined as *humankind*. The effectiveness of this formulation and its suitability in the

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18 Oxford Dictionary of English, 2003, entry "humanity".

19 Those concepts closely recall the two fundamental modalities of existence, agency and communion, elaborated by Bakan in “*The duality of human existence*”. Agency represents individual's striving to assert the self, to experience competence, achievement and power whereas communion is the desire to closely relate and cooperate with other people.

20 Kelman, 1973, p. 48.

21 *Ibidem*.

22 Italics added here and in the following lines-

context of international crimes, can also be attested in the words of François de Menthon, who was a prosecutor in the Trial of German Major War criminals at Nuremberg in 1946. According to the French jurist humanity can be defined “in two complementary ideas: the dignity of the human being considered in each and every person individually, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the permanence of the human being considered within the whole of humanity<sup>23</sup>”. This is the “essential conception of the individual, in each and in all, the individual and the universal<sup>24</sup>”.

Supported by these formulations, I would thus say that to accord humanity<sup>25</sup> means to recognise others' human qualities, that is the humanness, and the corresponding belonging to human kind. Nonetheless, the two aspects of humanity, namely the agentive and the communal one, are deeply related: human beings, because of their very humanness, feel the affinity with their fellow men, with whom they develop empathetic relations. The words of the Latin poet Terence well represents the link between individual humanness and the belonging to humankind: “I am a human, and thus nothing that concerns a man do I deem a matter of indifference to me<sup>26</sup>”. It means that, since the fact that I own a human identity, I feel involved in the community of men, which is the whole humankind. Hence, on these premises, to perceive others' humanity- to humanize them in a relational context- is therefore to recognise their humanness and their belonging to humankind, by accepting the subject as owning those properly human qualities and being part of an interconnected network of similarly human individuals.

On the basis of the above we could say that to dehumanise means to deliberately deprive a a fellow human being of his human qualities and exclude him from the

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23 IMT (International Military Tribunal), *The Trial of German Major War Criminals*, Thursday, January 17th, 1946, 36<sup>th</sup> day, part 4, p.365. Reference also: Macleod, 2010.

24 IMT, *ibidem*.

25 Interestingly, some authors conceptualize in different ways what is denied to the others in the dehumanisation process. Haslam, for instance, having established two distinct sense of humanness, respectively defines two different forms of dehumanisation as well: when the human uniqueness- that is for example the moral sensibility or the rationality- is denied, the animalistic dehumanisation occurs. That dehumanisation rests on a direct contrast between humans and animals. In the case of the stripping of the qualities belonging to human nature- namely agency or emotional responsiveness, we have instead the mechanistic dehumanisation, where people are contrasted with machines or automata. For more reference: Haslam, 2006.

26 Terence, *Heautontimorruenos*, Act I, scene I, par. 140. In Latin: “Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto”.

“human” category. The dehumanised subject is stripped of both his identity and his belonging to human community. He is viewed as lacking of the necessary qualities to be recognised as human and he is no longer perceived as an independent subject, but instead homogenized and negatively stereotyped into a wider group from which he cannot be in any way distinguishable. Moreover, the group is not seen anymore as part of the community of individuals belonging to the same humanity. Its members are simply excluded from the sphere of human community. Humanity is thus no longer the universal labelling for all human beings, but it is a social construction, to be defined in terms of a category to whether to belong or not to belong.

This was a highly abstract section, but dehumanisation is not an abstract phenomenon at all: it has indeed a relevant role in every human society. I will elaborate on it in the next section, drawing upon concrete cases to make the conceptualization more insightful.

### **3. Dehumanisation in human society**

*“They are the ones who are sick. They are the ones who are perverted. They are the ones who are dangerous. They are the ones who are subhuman. They are the ones who are human debris (...) not our soldiers and not our prison guards<sup>27</sup>”.*

Heavy words. Hateful words. Dangerous ones. Have they been proclaimed in the pages of *Der Stürmer*, a Nazi propaganda newspaper? Or in the *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*, the Rwandan radio station that played a leading role in the incitement of the genocide of Tutsi and moderate Hutu? No. They have been spoken by an American popular radio broadcaster in the days following the Abu Ghraib scandal. Sadly, in fact, dehumanisation is part of every human society.

Having clarified the meaning of dehumanisation, I will now argue that this process

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<sup>27</sup> Rush Limbaugh, popular broadcaster in the USA, 13 million listeners. Quoted by Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.22.

may arise in every human society. In doing that I will refer to the Social Identity Theory developed by socio-psychologists Tajfel and Turner in the attempt to explain intergroup behaviours. According to these scholars, to categorize the world into groups and categories is a natural tendency of human beings. People, in fact, do not merely see themselves as individuals, but also as representatives of their social group<sup>28</sup>. The effects can be positive because the members of a specific group gain self-esteem from their membership. Nevertheless, the forming of a social identity may lead to social comparison, “a mechanism by which people tend to compare each other and simultaneously distance themselves from the other groups<sup>29</sup>”. It means that groups define their identity in contrast to the identity of others and, by doing that, they devalue at the same time the other group: a sense of superiority is indeed always associated with the respective inferiority of the others<sup>30</sup>.

The social comparison can be better understood by referring to the work of the psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson who worked on the psycho-social development of human beings. In his view, human societies have always had the tendency to identify others not only as different, but as less than human, by assigning degrading and bestial characteristics to individuals belonging to a certain group and delegitimizing them<sup>31</sup>. Such process is called pseudospeciation, a term introduced by Erikson that means that members of a certain group, the *in-group*, have the tendency to consider members of other groups, the *out-groups*, as having evolved genetically into different, separate, and inferior species to their own<sup>32</sup>. The scholar says that pseudospeciation “denotes that while man is obviously one species, he appears and continues on the scene split up into groups ( from tribes to nations, from castes to classes, from religions to ideologies and professional associations) which provide their members with a firm sense of unique and superior human identity- and some sense of

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28 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 248.

29 *Ibidem*.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 Erikson, 1984. Also: Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.63.

32 Oxford English Dictionary, 2003. The in-group is there defined as an exclusive, typically small, group of people with a shared interest or identity. The out-group, on the other side, refers to those who do not belong to a specific in-group.

immortality<sup>33</sup>”.

It should be acknowledged that, to a certain extent, pseudospeciation is inevitable: every group, in one way or another, has always considered the others to be inferiors. People, in fact, largely define themselves not only according to their belonging to a specific group<sup>34</sup>, but also on the basis of who does not belong to it. Identity is greatly built on people's membership to an in-group and it is not possible to define those who belong to the group without identifying at the same time also who are the excluded ones. According to Erikson, “even the most advanced nations can harbour and, in fact, make fanatically explicit, a mystical adherence to the mentality of pseudospeciation<sup>35</sup>”. The targeted group, characterized by the perpetrators in relation to nationality, ethnicity, race, religion or other features, has always been categorized into extremely negative social traits: its members were described in degrading biological and zoological terms or by the use of demonizing labelling. Characteristics that set certain individuals apart from the majority have always been exploited, for example the skin colour or the religious beliefs, and those identified as being inferior have been described as creatures lacking of fundamental qualities to be recognised at the same level of the in-group members. Throughout history different groups have been variously depicted as sub-human creatures lacking of both moral sensibility and cognitive capacity, culture and self-restraints<sup>36</sup>. In modern history it is possible to mention for example the case of the Indios: they were initially called *homunculi*, which literally means little humans. They were barely considered human beings and had to be “humanised”<sup>37</sup> and converted to Christianity. Similarly, black people were considered by the colonialists as lacking of human qualities and naturally-born slaves. Moreover they were depicted as having an incontinent sexual appetite, a certain tendency to violence and proneness to criminality and also an unusual tolerance to pain<sup>38</sup>. For this reason, they were treated like animals.

According to Haslam, dehumanisation does not only manifest explicitly in violent

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33 Erikson, 1984, p. 214.

34 Alvarez, 2010, p.67.

35 Erikson quoted in Alvarez, 2010, p. 67.

36 Haslam, 2006, p. 252.

37 Chamayou, 2012, p. 37.

38 Haslam, 2006, p. 252.

situations, but whenever individuals or out-groups are ascribed lesser degree of humanness than the self or the in-group<sup>39</sup>. However, the dehumanisation process, even if typical of every human society, is certainly aggravated during conflicts. Pseudospeciation, in some circumstances, may in fact lead to the dehumanisation of the targeted out-group which entails that those individuals are not considered “humans” anymore. Members of the out-group, in this case, not only lack cognitive and emotional qualities, but are also depicted as an actual threat to the dominant group. The member of this group are perceived as dangerous enemies menacing the society, the state or the human community as a whole. This happens very often- but not only- in war contexts when the process is exploited in order to depict the enemy with dehumanising features, as some kind of monster. German dehumanised the Hereros looking at them “as creatures being approximately on the same level as baboons (...), valuing their horses and oxen more highly than they do with natives<sup>40</sup>”. In return, Germans were dehumanised by Russians: “ The Germans are not human beings. (...) If you kill one German, kill another- there is nothing more amusing for us than a heap of German corpses<sup>41</sup>”. Japanese dehumanised Chinese: “We called the Chinese *chancorro*, that meant below human, like bugs or animals. The Chinese didn't belong to the human race<sup>42</sup>. But they were dehumanised in return by American soldiers who took trophies from their dead bodies: “The Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive, like cockroaches or mice<sup>43</sup>”.

Dehumanisation, hence, has always been a key feature in all human societies, having a relevance in the way in which the group identity is constructed as well as, in the case of violent conflicts. In these contexts this process is intensified and manipulated in order to shape the way in which the enemy is described and, thus, perceived. However, my research focuses on the role of dehumanisation in the crime of all crimes because this process becomes more evident in the case of genocide. However, in order

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39 Haslam, 2006, p. 262.

40 Example mentioned in Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.143.

41 Ilya Ehrenburg, Russian Jewish poet and novelist, in a pamphlet to distribute to Stalin's red Army.

Quoted in Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.16.

42 *Ivi*, p.18.

43 *Ivi*, p.18-9.



for the genocide to occur, besides the dehumanisation process, a specific context is needed.

#### **4. The roots of evil: the genocidal context**

As noted, dehumanisation of the out-groups is a common characteristic in all human societies, especially when it targets the enemy in war contexts. Nevertheless, this tendency does not always escalate into genocidal acts or other forms of mass violence. For the genocide to occur, a context of violence is needed.

A context of violence is defined by Kelman as an environment of an overall policy that is genocidal in character, in the sense that is designed to destroy a category of people defined in ethnic, national, racial, religious, or other terms<sup>44</sup>. The scholar affirms that such policy may be deliberately aimed at the systematic annihilation of the members of the targeted group as an end in itself or may have an objective other than extermination, even if this group is considered as entirely expendable to reach that goal. In the first case we could mention the Nazi destruction of European Jews, in the second, for example, the U.S. policy of pacification of civil population during the war in Indochina<sup>45</sup>. In any case, the context of violence clearly underlines that certain specific groups of people must be annihilated or, otherwise, can be considered as absolutely expendable.

Usually the context of violence results from the combination of various other factors able to trigger genocidal acts and often occurs at a time of change, when multiple pressures oppress the population and the conflict spreads in the society: it is more likely that genocide happens during an international or civil war, in a sudden vacuum of power, during or after a period of colonization or when a regime falls, after a revolution, a military coup d' état or the rise of a despotic ruler<sup>46</sup>. Almost all authors agree that the origins of genocide can be found in difficult life conditions<sup>47</sup>, when

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44 Kelman, 1973,p.31.

45 *Ibidem*.

46 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.171.

47 Harff, 2003 quoted in Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 172; Staub, 1989, p. 13. Also Alvarez, 2001.

individuals or members of a specific group face hard times that have a deleterious impact on the physical self, that is one's life, safety and well-being, or on the psychological self, that is one's self concept, values and ways of life<sup>48</sup>. Resulting in starvation or, in less extreme situations, in a prolonged sense of deprivation, these circumstances and hardships of life bring a deep frustration in the individuals and may constitute a precipitating tipping point that set the downward spiral in motion and, ultimately, lead to genocidal violence. The acceleration of the country's decline, in fact, enhances a sense of desperation and this psychological tendency has a potential in inciting hostile and aggressive feelings<sup>49</sup>: atrocities widely feed on a problematic context.

In these circumstances, placing the blame on others, as a scapegoat, is an easy solution. For this reason, at social level, genocide is more likely to occur in a plural and stratified society in which evident differences exist among certain groups<sup>50</sup>. In these polarized contexts, one group, particularly a wealthy but vulnerable minority one<sup>51</sup>, can be easily blamed for the deprivation and suffering of the other. This group is progressively devalued, marginalized and oppressed by the society and becomes a scapegoat. According to Staub, scapegoating offers at the same time an understanding of the problem and a possible solution: the attack against the “responsible” group<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, the “devaluation of a subgroup helps to raise low self-esteem<sup>53</sup>” because the responsibility is diverted. However, also cultural- societal characteristics influence the proneness to genocide: cultures that have some predisposing features for group violence<sup>54</sup> as well as countries in which there is a dominant state, usually authoritarian or oppressive<sup>55</sup> are more likely to see the spread of genocidal act as a consequence of scapegoating.

However, genocide and mass violence do not directly arise from hardships of life

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48 Staub, 1989, p. 15.

49 *Ivi*, chapter 2.

50 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.174.

51 Harff, 2003 quoted in Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 172.

52 Staub, 1989, p.17.

53 *Ibidem*.

54 *Ivi*, p.18.

55 Harff, 2003 quoted in Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 172.

and the consequent psychological reactions: they are a process on what Staub defines a “continuum of destruction<sup>56</sup>”. According to the psychologist, in fact, “people learn and change by doing, by participation, as a consequence of their action<sup>57</sup>”. It means that initial behaviours, even small and apparently insignificant acts, result in psychological changes and progressively involve the individual in the process of destruction: the perpetrator, by doing, becomes increasingly able and willing to commit violence against the victim, culminating in depths of depravity that, at the beginning, he would never have imagined himself capable of. Genocide and other mass violence, therefore, cannot be reduced to the only act of physical destruction. For this reason, the model of continuum of destruction<sup>58</sup> is an insightful one that underlines the recognizable and, thus, predictable pattern that would finally lead to the most heinous acts: genocide is an inexorable progression, a process from minor acts of blaming and scapegoating to the complete annihilation.

## 5. Genocidal process and stage of dehumanisation

The understanding of mass violence as a progression of acts, thus a process, can already be found in the original theorization of genocide of Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin was a Polish lawyer and scholar who coined the word genocide and drafted the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. In his major work, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, he defined genocide as follows:

*“Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass*

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56 Staub, 1989, p. 17.

57 *Ibidem*.

58 According to Staub, 1989, these horrific instances of violence all began with the *devaluation* of certain groups, proceeded to *marginalization* of those same groups (i.e., to covert discrimination and denial of civil, social, or political rights, etc.), moved on to overt *discrimination*, and culminated in open *resentment* and *aggression* toward groups identified as suitable targets of hostility and violence. In the end, these groups were labeled as “enemies” and identified as causes of prolonged difficulty that consequently had to be *eliminated* (or exterminated).

*killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves<sup>59</sup>”.*

It is thus a “coordinated plan of different actions<sup>60</sup>” aiming at the “disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals<sup>61</sup>” belonging to a specific group. It cannot be therefore reduced to a single act: genocidal violence is a “multi-dimensional phenomenon including a wide variety of actions and which evolves over a period of time<sup>62</sup>”.

Interestingly also Gregory H. Stanton, founder and president of the NGO Genocide Watch, interpreted the genocide as a “coordinated plan of different actions” as Lemkin did. Stanton, in fact, divided the whole process into ten stages<sup>63</sup>: classification, symbolisation, discrimination, dehumanisation, organisation, polarisation, preparation, persecution, extermination and denial. He argues that these are the recurring stages in the genocidal process, “predictable but not inexorable<sup>64</sup>” because at each stage preventive measures can stop the progression. It is not to be understood as a linear process: stages very often occur simultaneously and continue to operate throughout the process of genocide.

The first two steps operate in all ordinary societies: “All cultures have categories to distinguish people into 'us and them' by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality<sup>65</sup>” and symbolise the out-groups by labelling and attributing them names, symbols or

59 Lemkin, 1944, Chapter IX, p.79.

60 *Ibidem*.

61 *Ibidem*.

62 Moerland, 2015.

63 Stanton, *The Ten Stage of Genocide*, 2013. Available online at:

<http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html>. Originally presented in 1996 as a briefing paper, “The Eight Stages of Genocide” at the US State Department. Discrimination and Persecution have been consequently added to the 1996 model.

64 *Ibidem*.

65 *Ibidem*.

stereotypical images. For this reason classification and symbolisation, the first two stages, are universally human and do not necessarily result in violent behaviours. Nonetheless, when combined with hatred, Stanton underlines that symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups as in the case of the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule or the blue scarf for people from the Eastern Zone in Khmer Rouge Cambodia<sup>66</sup>. The third stage, the discrimination, involves the denial of certain rights to the members of a specific group and is reached through "law, custom, and political power". It reveals an already radicalised situation as in the case of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which stripped Jews of their German citizenship, and prohibited their employment by the government and by universities<sup>67</sup>. However, these three stages do not yet constitute the turning point: it is the dehumanisation that precipitates the society into the darkest part of the genocidal process. Stanton describes the fourth stage in these terms:

*“Dehumanisation: One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. dehumanisation overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group<sup>68</sup>”.*

Once dehumanisation is merged with the genocidal ideology, it follows the whole, progressive descent into the abyss of violence, from the preparatory measures to the perpetration of the genocide itself. It is a deadly circle where dehumanisation plays a crucial role: when victimisers begin to harm the dehumanised group, the process is difficult to stop. The genocidal process itself further increases the perpetrators' tendency to dehumanise their victims<sup>69</sup>: according to Kelman, those who participate in the

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66 Stanton, 2013

67 *Ibidem*.

68 *Ibidem*.

69 Kelman, 1973, p. 50.

bureaucratic apparatus increasingly see the victims as faceless numbers whereas those who directly perpetrate the massacre “are reinforced in their perception of the victims as less than human by observing their very victimisation<sup>70</sup>”. In order to ease the violence, in fact, victims are degraded and humiliated to be perceived as less than human. But, in turn, the degradation and humiliation caused by violence further dehumanises the victims and this again psychologically sustains the violence. In this downward circle, thus, dehumanisation feeds on itself<sup>71</sup>.

For this reason dehumanisation represents as much a decisive as deadly step in the genocidal process. It is indeed the culmination of the categorization and discrimination phase in which a group of people is symbolically and physically separated from the whole society in order to depict its members as in-humane creatures. Moreover it is at the same time the precondition that facilitate the further stages of the process and almost consent the genocidal violence to take place.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter I investigated what it means to dehumanise and what the role of dehumanisation is in the genocidal process. Dehumanisation entails both the denial of humanness and the denial of belonging to humankind. By referring to Kelman's framework, humanness can be defined as the set of qualities that constitute the fundamental identity of human beings whereas humankind refers to the “interconnected network of individuals” that constitute the community of men. By referring to both Social Identity and Pseudospeciation Theory, it has been possible to recognise that dehumanisation has always been present in all human societies. However, this natural tendency to demean and dehumanise the out-groups is certainly aggravated in the case of conflicts where enemies are depicted as an inhumane threat menacing the state. When it occurs in a context of violence, characterised by several favourable circumstances and by an overall genocidal policy, dehumanisation constitutes a crucial stage in the

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70 Kelman, 1973, p. 50.

71 *Ibidem*.

genocidal process itself. Stanton, by dividing the genocidal process in ten stages, argued that whereas the first stages regularly occur in all societies, the stage of “dehumanisation overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder”. In this sense, I argued that the stage of dehumanisation constitutes the turning point in the genocidal process: it precipitates in fact society into the abyss of physical destruction of the dehumanised group.

After having defined the issue in this first chapter, in the next one I will address the theorization of dehumanisation in the attempt to explain the mechanisms through which the morality of perpetrators is disengaged from “inhumane” behaviours.





## Chapter II

### Theorizing Dehumanisation

*“We lived happily together for many years and now it has come to killing each other's babies. What is happening to us?”*

Indira Hadziomerović, Muslim Bosnian girl, 17 years old,<sup>72</sup>

*“The children are not the enemy... The enemy is the blood in them”<sup>73</sup>*

Oskar Groening, SS Officer stationed at Auschwitz concentration camp

#### 1. Killing each other's babies

In 1992, Bosnian Serbs forces besieged Sarajevo. The city was bombarded and thousands of people were killed. Among them hundreds of children. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1992, a bus full of children from the Ljubica Ivezić orphanage was fired on by snipers. Vedrana Glavas, two years old, and Roki Sulejmanovic, aged fourteen months were both killed. The day after, the children's funeral was also the target of an attack: mourners fled in terror when the cemetery came under mortar bombardment<sup>74</sup>. The young Indira, a mourner at the funeral, commented with the above words. In the context

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72 Article on the *Independent*, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1992, quoted by Glover, 2012, p.123.

73 Groening quoted by Laurence Rees, available online at:  
[http://ww2history.com/key\\_moments/Holocaust/Himmler\\_s\\_Posen\\_speech](http://ww2history.com/key_moments/Holocaust/Himmler_s_Posen_speech).

74 Glover, 2012, p. 127.

of mass atrocities, killing each other's children become possible because they are not considered human beings. "If you cannot catch the louse, you kill its eggs<sup>75</sup>" said a Hutu slogan.

In order to massacre the members of the targeted group, even kids, the degree of dehumanisation required is extreme and should penetrate every aspect of society as well as individual beliefs. But how does dehumanisation concretely operate? In the previous chapter I investigated the meaning of dehumanisation and its role in the genocidal process. Now I will consider how it happens, trying to make insightful the mechanisms that allow the dehumanisation to occur. I will firstly address the role of a genocidal ideology with its dehumanising features in the perpetration of atrocities. Then, by resorting to the psychologist Albert Bandura, I will consider how the dehumanising ideology disengages the perpetrator's morality. Consequently, I will apply the Neutralisation Theory by the criminologists Sykes and Matza in the context of genocide in order to enrich the analysis with a criminological perspective.

## **2. Once you believe in the absurd: genocidal ideology and dehumanisation.**

*"You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. Truly, whoever is able to make you absurd is able to make you unjust<sup>76</sup>".*

Voltaire, *Questions sur les miracles*, 1765

The essay "*Questions sur les miracles*" is an inspirational work in which the French philosopher Voltaire challenges religious idolatry and pleads for his fellow men to use their reason while considering the commands of the leaders. I think that the above

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<sup>75</sup> Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> Voltaire, *Questions sur les Miracles*, 1765.

mentioned words may be useful to understand the consequences of ideology: once you believe in the absurd- said Voltaire- you could also be led to commit the most atrocious acts in the name of those beliefs. This is its enormous power. Genocide certainly takes place out of various economic, political and social reasons. However, even if enlightening, these motivations alone are not sufficient to explain genocidal acts. These motives must always be supported in fact by a strong ideological component that is able to build a specific psychological environment and an overall policy of destruction of a certain group.

Ideology could be defined as a system of socially shared beliefs that are associated with the characteristic properties of a group. According to van Dijk, every ideology has a basic structure that consists of the definition of its members. It also provides for a description of the activities carried out by the group, the explanation of its goals, values and norms, the relations to other groups and the distribution of resources<sup>77</sup>. By defining the group's identity, its aims and interests and its relative position in society, ideologies provide the intellectual framework to represent people as individuals belonging to a certain group as well as to interpret the world around them. However, besides the expression of the core values of the group and the definition of the normative framework and system of values, ideologies are also able to mobilize populations into action according to certain kind of behaviours<sup>78</sup>. In this sense, ideology constructs reality: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences<sup>79</sup>”.

According to Alvarez, genocide is inextricably ideological<sup>80</sup>: all genocides have an underlying ideological component fundamental in facilitating the perpetration of this specific crime<sup>81</sup>. These atrocious events require a strong framework of beliefs in order to provide both the core values and the purpose to act in such a destructive way. Genocide,

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77 Van Dijk, 2000, p.17.

78 Alvarez, “Destructive Beliefs: Genocide and the Role of Ideology” pp. 213-231 in Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p. 214 and p. 230.

79 Thomas & Thomas quoted in Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.175.

80 According to Alvarez, 2010; Staub, 1989; Smeulers & Haveman, p.220. Also, p. 215: “All genocide have an ideological component”.

81 Alvarez, 2010, p.57.

in fact, before being perpetrated, needs to be conceived in individuals' minds. For this reason, it cannot take place without an appropriate ideological framework: genocidal ideologies “provide the intellectual scaffolding upon which genocide is constructed<sup>82</sup>”. By examining the historical examples of genocide, it is possible to establish a number of recurring ideological motifs, which display a clear dehumanising tendency. Genocidal ideologies always include a “utopian vision of man, society and the world<sup>83</sup>” in which some people simply do not fit. Those people must be for this reason removed from the social body in order to build a better society. Moreover, genocidal ideologies are often rooted in nationalism<sup>84</sup> and are based on a clear distinction between “us” and “them”, affirming the superiority of the in-group and the threatening, degraded “inhumanity” of the out-groups. In addition, genocidal ideologies have often totalitarian features<sup>85</sup>: they are monolithic and radical views of the world that require a complete subjugation and blind obedience, contributing in that way to deprive the perpetrators themselves of their human agency<sup>86</sup>. Another ideological theme that often recurs in the genocidal ideologies is the notion of past victimisation<sup>87</sup>: by referring to a sense of historic suffering and victimisation and perpetuating an image of the in-group as having been repetitively injured, this belief instigates violent reactions against those who are deemed to be the historical victimisers, the inhumane enemies. This set of beliefs is also linked with the tendency of genocidal ideology to resort to scapegoating narratives<sup>88</sup> that transfer all the blaming into a group of people and hold them responsible of all the problems and misfortunes of a society. As Staub underlines, “a nation that feels itself on the verge of destruction will not hesitate to destroy another group it holds responsible for its situation<sup>89</sup>”.

Considering the ideological architecture of historic examples of genocide, all these recurring themes, drawn upon a variety of nationalistic, historical, scientific and

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82 Alvarez in Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.220.

83 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.175.

84 *Ibidem*.

85 *Ibidem*.

86 I will come back on that later, in the fourth chapter.

87 Alvarez, 2010, p. 64.

88 Ivi, p. 68.

89 Staub, 1989, p.126.

religious beliefs<sup>90</sup>, have a great relevance in the ideology that leads to genocidal crimes and can be said to ease and jointly enable the most serious abuses. Nevertheless, as I try to show, these ideological themes, in genocidal context, always display segments of dehumanising labelling. Dehumanisation thus is one of the most relevant aspects of genocidal ideologies. As stated by Alvarez, in fact, “belief systems that dehumanize entire populations contribute tremendously to genocide because they enhance attitudes facilitating violence against others<sup>91</sup>”. What these dehumanising words do, we will figure it out in the next section.

### 3. Disengaging morality

*“Most people would hesitate to torture or kill a human being like themselves. But when that human being is spoken of as though he were not a human being, but as the representative of some wicked principle, we lose our scruples.... All political and nationalist propaganda aims at only one thing; to persuade one set of people that and that it is therefore legitimate to rob, swindle, bully, and even murder them<sup>92</sup>”.*

Aldous Huxley, 1936

Against the fascism that was spreading all around Europe, Aldous Huxley in 1936 pronounced these prophetic words. He stressed the power of propaganda to persuade people that “another set of people are not really human” and to establish thus that they can be the target of a “legitimate” violence. Dehumanisation appears therefore to be, in his view, the main aim of every nationalist ideology, with the strength to be able to nullify those moral scruples that normally impede people to commit violence against other human beings. Having investigated the role of dehumanisation in the genocidal ideology I will now reflect on how the dehumanisation process works.

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90 Alvarez, 2010, p. 73.

91 *Ivi*, p.66.

92 Aldous Huxley, unpublished speech, quoted by Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.21.

Besides the de-legitimation provoked by the degrading labelling, the denial of humanity to others entails much more suffering: dehumanisation constitutes indeed a relevant precondition of violence and, often, paves the way for atrocity. The consequences of dehumanisation are well expressed in the words of a Japanese veteran in regards to the atrocities committed in Nanjing in 1937, following the capture of the city: “If I'd thought of them as human beings I couldn't have done it. But ...I thought of them as animals or below human beings<sup>93</sup>”. He confessed, thus, that he was able to indulge in the most unthinkable acts only inasmuch as he was persuaded that the Chinese victims were not human beings. These words embody how dangerous dehumanisation could be and are confirmed in many other testimonies, for instance: “They did not know that the Tutsi were human beings, because if they had thought about that they wouldn't have killed them. Let me include myself as someone who accepted it; I wouldn't have accepted that they are human beings<sup>94</sup>”.

In order to investigate how dehumanisation operates, it must be underlined that the interconnected network of human beings is generally characterised by a universe of obligation, defined by Fein as “the circle of individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends<sup>95</sup>”. Those who are inside these boundaries are perceived as creatures deserving a fair treatment. The relation among them follows the Kantian ethic:

*“Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is in turn bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity; for a man cannot be used merely as a means by any man (...) but must always be used at the same time as an end. It is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, so neither can he act contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others (...) he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a*

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93 Yoshio Tshuchiya, Japanese veteran referring to the atrocities in Nanjing. Quoted by Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.18.

94 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 153.

95 Fein, 1979, p. 4.

*practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other man<sup>96</sup>*”.

These moral obligations are enshrined in the human rights standards: they constitute the legal basis of the moral obligations.

However very frequently, especially in the most destructive conflicts, a group of people is excluded by the universe of obligations of the counterpart. Moral exclusion is the process by which people are placed “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply<sup>97</sup>”. It is characterized by: “a) seeing those excluded as psychologically distant from and unconnected with oneself; b) lacking constructive moral obligations toward those excluded; c) viewing those excluded as nonentities, expendable, and undeserving of fairness and community resources that could foster their well-being; and d) approving of procedures and outcomes for those excluded that would be unacceptable for those inside the scope of justice<sup>98</sup>”. Those who are excluded by the universe of moral obligations are perceived as laying beyond our moral concern. They are, for this reason, “eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or condoned as normal, inevitable and deserved<sup>99</sup>”.

In the case of dehumanisation, moral exclusion does not touch the moral obligations nor the related rights, but it alters the subjects to which they are recognised by defining certain people as less than human. This set of beliefs moves them outside the “circle of moral obligation<sup>100</sup>”. It means that, since the categorization of “humans” no longer applies to them, the dehumanised individuals are not considered anymore as being part of the perpetrator's morality and, consequently, they are also excluded from the recognition of human rights. Essentially, certain “humans” are disconnected from those fundamental rights that would normally apply to every human being. The perpetrators, thus, do not avoid to obey to their moral obligations, but exclude a certain group from

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96 Kant, translation by M. Gregor, 1991, p.255

97 Opatow quoted in Haslam, 2006, p.254.

98 Opatow, Gerson & Woodside, 2005, pp. 305-6.

99 *Ivi*, p. 305.

100 Fein quoted in Alvarez, 2010, p.67.

the community of human beings and from the universe of moral relations and obligations that generally characterises human life: divested of both their agentive role- that is humanness- and communal relation, namely the belonging to humankind, the dehumanised subject no longer evokes compassion and empathy. The moral restraints against violence do not inhibit anymore the victimiser's cruel behaviours. While perpetrating violence against the dehumanised group, in fact, the victimiser does not lose his morality, but disengages it by excluding the targeted group from the universe of moral obligations.

The role of dehumanisation in moral disengagement could be made insightful with reference to the work of the psychologist Albert Bandura<sup>101</sup>. According to his socio-cognitive theory, people do not operate in a vacuum as autonomous moral agents. They rather react to a complex framework of social realities and interactions. Therefore, morality is not the outcome of an abstract reasoning, but the concrete result of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences. Moral agency manifests both in the power to refrain from inhuman behaviours and in the power to behave humanely and is activated by self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral conduct. According to Bandura, in fact, “moral reasoning is linked to moral action through effective self-regulatory mechanisms by which moral agency is exercised<sup>102</sup>”. It means that, through this self-regulative process, people judge their conduct in relation to guiding moral standards, behaving in ways that manifest a virtuous agency and otherwise refraining from inhuman actions.

Nevertheless, these anticipatory mechanisms governing virtuous conduct do not operate unless they are activated. Sometimes, they are simply not activated: the moral self- sanctions are selectively disengaged from cruel behaviour. This is what is conceptualized by Bandura as moral disengagement, the cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a positive one. In order to commit immoral acts, many psychosocial manoeuvres exist by which moral self- sanctions can be selectively disengaged: the disengagement may aim to reformulate and redefine positively the

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101 Bandura, 2002.

102 *Ivi*, p.102.



conduct of the perpetrator through a moral justification of the act, a palliative comparison and an euphemistic labelling of the misconduct; to displace and diffuse the responsibility of the perpetrator; to misconstrue the detrimental effects caused and, finally, to describe the victim according to specific blaming features. This last mechanism is precisely called by Bandura dehumanisation.

According to Bandura, to perceive another as human activates empathetic reactions through perceived similarity and belonging to the same humanity. It is difficult to mistreat humanised victims without risking personal distress and self-condemnation<sup>103</sup>. Bandura, thus, underlines the deathly power of dehumanisation: the consequence of the dehumanising process is that morality can be disengaged through the stripping of human qualities from the victimised individuals.

To summarize, in order to commit genocide, the individual moral landscape has to be transformed<sup>104</sup>. Thanks to dehumanisation the morality is disengaged and the logic according to which the extermination of an entire group of people is in the natural order of things is individually and socially normalized. The dehumanising ideology, disengaging perpetrators' morality, provides the intellectual scaffolding upon which genocide is constructed<sup>105</sup>. Having focused on the harmful impact that dehumanisation has on the moral perception of the perpetrators, I will now move to consider how these moral restraints are concretely weakened by resorting to more criminological research in order to gain a better understanding of this psycho- social theory.

#### **4. The treacherous inhuman enemy: Techniques of neutralisation and dehumanisation**

In order to explain the inner working of the dehumanising process, I will resort to the Neutralisation Theory<sup>106</sup>. According to this theory, developed in '50s by Sykes and

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103 Bandura, 2002, pp.108-9.

104 Fujii, 2004, p. 2.

105 Alvarez, 2010, p.61.

106 Sykes and Matza, 1957.

Matza in relation to youthful offenders, when an individual commits an illegal act, he does not refer to a deviant moral code but rather resorts to some sort of mechanisms to temporarily lay to rest the urgency to follow the common moral conduct. Delinquents, thus, develop a set of justifications for their criminal behaviour that serve to nullify their conventional normative system of values in the moment in which they engage in reprehensible behaviour. These techniques are not deviant values *per se*, but definitional tools useful to temporarily suppress individual normative system under certain circumstances<sup>107</sup>. In this sense neutralisation techniques recall the selective activation and disengagement of self-sanctions theorized by Bandura: they permit different types of conduct by people with the same moral standards<sup>108</sup>.

Neutralisation techniques are an answer to the apparently unsolvable conflict between personal beliefs and deviant behaviours: they give the opportunity to avoid normative moral system in the perpetration of crime.<sup>109</sup> Different from rationalization, that is used in the attempt to ease the conscience in the aftermath of an abuse, these techniques are used prior to the crime to make it possible to engage in otherwise reprehensible activities. They can be divided in five major types: the Denial of Responsibility defines the delinquent as lacking responsibility for his deviant action; the Denial of Injury centres instead on the fact that the action caused no harm; the Denial of the Victim insists that the victims deserved the treatments a result of a retaliation or a sort of punishment; the Condemnation of the Condemners shift the blame from the delinquent's own deviant acts to the motives and behaviours of those who judge him; finally the Appeal to Higher Loyalties sacrifices the demands of society to those of the smaller group to which the transgressor belongs to, a gang, a party or the friendship clique<sup>110</sup>.

In the context of genocide, ideologies are institutionalised neutralisation techniques<sup>111</sup> and I think that it is extremely insightful to apply these techniques to the

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107 Alvarez, 1997, p. 151.

108 Bandura, 2002, p.102.

109 Alvarez, 1997, p. 151.

110 Sykes & Matza, 1957.

111 Alvarez, 1997, p. 169.

most serious cases of mass violence. Alvarez interestingly already applied them in the case of Holocaust<sup>112</sup>, in the attempt to recognise the mechanisms that allowed the Germans to participate in the genocide. It may be argued that the Holocaust, as opposed to conventional crimes perpetrated in infringement of law, involved law-abiding citizens acting in a legal framework that legitimated the annihilation of specific categories. Nevertheless, the participation in genocide constitutes such an outstanding deviation from internalized social and moral norms, an act so far removed from routine behaviour that it peremptorily required some internal adjustments. It is in fact not an easy aim to change an internal system of values and beliefs. An innate moral inhibition exists that is clearly not compatible with genocidal actions. The techniques of neutralisation, reinforced by the wider socio-political German context, represented an effective instrument to facilitate the process by which individuals may suppress internal constraints to extreme, even atrocious behaviours in specific circumstances and against a specific target while maintaining the perception that their moral values have not been violated. However, besides the Nazi genocide, neutralisation techniques may represent a useful criminological tool to interpret also other cases of genocide and, generally, many gross human rights violations. They could help to comprehend how individuals become involved in the most heinous abuses in “obedience” to an official framework even if it goes against their personal normative system.

In the current analysis of the role of dehumanisation in genocide, among the five techniques described by Sykes and Matza, I think that the denial of victim plays a particularly relevant role in the construction of the dehumanising ideology: it allows the perpetrator to state that the victim deserves his own victimisation. The technique essentially denies the existence of the victim by transforming him or her into a person deserving the unfair treatment. The injury “is not really an injury: rather it is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment<sup>113</sup>”. The victim, in this way, is transformed in a wrong-doer whereas the perpetrators become a sort of noble and rightful avenger. The whole argumentation obviously is context-dependent and differs in relation to the different

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112 Alvarez, 1997.

113 Sykes and Matza, 1957, p. 668.

features of the genocidal ideology. Nonetheless the victim is consistently perceived as an enemy or a traitor, as an actual threat. Because of this assertion, appealing to a long tradition of justifiable violence in the case of self-defence<sup>114</sup>, the mass violence turns into a necessary form of protection of the nation, the family or even the core values of the whole human race. Moreover, in considering the participation in genocidal violence, the criminologist Alvarez added another neutralisation technique to those enumerated by Sykes and Matza, namely the denial of humanity<sup>115</sup>. According to the scholar, this technique expands the applicability of the Neutralisation Theory to genocide and other gross mass violences, explaining how the participants can distance themselves from their intended victim to the point of being able to remove them from the universe of shared humanity and the relative moral obligations.

By combining the denial of victim and the denial of humanity, therefore, I argue that is possible to tackle down the core feature of dehumanisation operating in genocidal context. They in fact jointly provide the fundamental ideological framework to overcome normative obstacles, allowing in this way for individuals to participate in genocide. In the genocidal ideology, in fact, stripping the humanity of the targeted group is not enough: the dehumanised subjects must also be perceived as enemies deserving the ruthless treatment. In order to have a better insight on how the denial of victim and the denial of humanity combine in a powerful genocidal ideology, I will refer to those that, according to Staub, were the three core messages spread by the Nazi propaganda in regards to Jews: Jews were perceived as subhuman vermin, a threat to purity of Aryans and a menace for German State<sup>116</sup>. This ideological construction clearly resorts to a combined use of the above mentioned neutralisation techniques: being depicted as a threat to purity and a menace for the state, Jews were denied the status of victim whereas, at the same time, being perceived as sub-humane, they were also denied the status of humans. The denial of humanity and the denial of victim are thus strongly related in the framing of genocidal ideology: besides the denial of humanness and humankind, in fact, also the denial of victimisation is an indispensable feature of the

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114 Alvarez, 1997, p. 162.

115 *Ivi*, p.166.

116 Staub, 1989, p.103.

dehumanisation process when it occurs in the context of genocide. The targeted individuals, in fact, are not only perceived as in-human creatures, but depicted as a treacherous enemy. It is in some way “easier” to kill enemies since the fact that they represent a real menace and people can be sufficiently provoked by them to be willing to take their lives. Killing, in that situation, is a response to an actual threat and is essentially more easily justified. I argue thus that in order for the genocide to occur, the dehumanised subject must indeed be portrayed not only as an inferior creature but also as an evil and perverse enemy who violates the most basic human values, threatening for one reason or another the whole society.

According to Kelman, by denying the identity of a person, his rationality is also denied<sup>117</sup>. That may be true in relation to some dehumanising ideologies like those supportive of the modern slavery of Afro-Americans. As we already mentioned, the slaves were considered as lacking the God-given rationality that differentiates men from beasts<sup>118</sup>. However, in the genocidal context, the reason of the targeted group is rarely denied. There are plenty of examples in fact of genocidal ideologies that do not deny the targeted group's rational agency. It is in fact not likely that the victims are described as lacking intelligence. This may be explained by underlining that, in genocide, the targets of massacres normally belong to groups that are physically weaker than the victimisers<sup>119</sup>. Since the fact that the victims are not armed enemies in the battlefield, but defenceless civilians, in order to overcome moral impediment against the killing of unarmed individuals, especially children, women and old people, these individuals must be perceived as a threatening enemy. In that way, the psychological forces directing people toward violence become so powerful that they outweigh the moral restraints that would normally inhibit such violence<sup>120</sup>. Dehumanised individuals in genocidal context are in fact represented as perfidious creatures whose rationality is headed by hideous reasons. The targeted group is blamed for conspiring against the state, the society or the whole human community. It is possible to find these features in all genocidal contexts.

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117 Kelman, 1973.

118 For more reference: Chamayou, 2012.

119 Kelman, 1973, p.32.

120 *Hvi*, p. 35.

The Nazis, for instance, did by no means deny that the Jews were rational agents. In fact, “they felt threatened by what they took to be the Jews' collective and conspiratorial agency, their destructive goals and degenerate values<sup>121</sup>”. They were persuaded that the Jews wanted their people to perish and thus they concluded: “for thousands of years the Jew has been destroying the nations. Let us make a new beginning today so that we can annihilate the Jews<sup>122</sup>”.

In the Armenian case the same features can be found: in numerous Turkish leaflets and reports distributed by the Ministry of War as well as in the most popular newspapers, Armenians were in fact depicted as perfidious traitors, conspiring with the enemy, planning to revolt, to siege Istanbul and to kill the Unionist leaders<sup>123</sup>. This situation was further exacerbated by the participation of a small part of Armenians along the Russian Army at the beginning of 1915 in the Battle of Sarikamish in which more than sixty thousands Turkish perished. This battle enhanced the blame of all Armenians in the eyes of the government and the public opinion, paving the way for the massacre<sup>124</sup>. The bloody defeat was in fact attributed to the treacherous deception of the “evil” Armenians. They were said to have “stabbed the Turks in the back<sup>125</sup>”.

Also in Rwanda, the Tutsi were not represented as unintelligent, but as despicable creatures infecting the country. Actually, they were considered highly cunning and deceiving, ready to use their intelligence to oppress and exploit the Hutu. The Hutu' s propaganda was able to depict the Tutsi as the vile and threatening foreigner enemy, willing to re-instate feudal order, to enslave Hutu and annihilate them<sup>126</sup>.

In the Bosnian case<sup>127</sup>, the propaganda escalated in intensity and began repeatedly to accuse non-Serbs of being extremists plotting genocide against the Serbs: periodicals from Belgrade featured stories on the ancient history of Serbs in order to inspire

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121 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 92.

122 Information from The Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team. Available online at: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/nazprop.html>

123 Akçam, 2006, p. 125.

124 Alvarez, 2010, p. 28.

125 Akçam, 2006, p.125.

126 Fujii, 2004, p.102.

127 Information taken from Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadic a/k/a "Dule", 1997, paragraph 91 quoted in Winton, p. 371.

increasing nationalism while every media- newspaper, television programmes and public proclamations- “bombarded” the Serb population by repeating that they had to protect themselves from the fundamentalist Muslim threat. As Biljana Plavšić, one of the three highest-ranking officials in Republika Srpska during the war, admitted at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY): “In the obsession not to become victims ever again, we allowed ourselves to become perpetrators<sup>128</sup>”.

As I tried to demonstrate, the core message of the dehumanising ideology in genocidal context is thus a combination between the denial of humanity and the denial of victim, which means that the targeted group is described as an in-humane treacherous enemy conspiring against the whole society.

Once engaged in genocidal acts, thus, participants constantly resort to this combination of neutralisation techniques to sustain their activities<sup>129</sup>: genocidal violence represents indeed a formidable challenge to individuals<sup>130</sup> and it is particularly crucial that these psychological manoeuvres operate throughout the whole genocidal process. Moreover, these techniques risk to foster an inexhaustible cycle of violence: before the perpetration, in fact, moral constraints are disengaged and the neutralisation techniques temporarily suppress individual normative system. After the crime, the inhumane act is rationalized and this rationalization may serve to justify a further neutralisation, facilitating a new perpetration.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this second chapter I addressed the theorization of dehumanisation process in order to understand how it operates in the genocidal society, disengaging perpetrators' constraints. We reflected on the fact that genocide is inextricably ideological. Every genocide has an underlying ideological scaffold which sustain the perpetrators and dehumanisation is a crucial step in the development of a genocidal ideology. Many aspects of the genocidal ideology in fact carry segments of dehumanising labelling.

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128 Drakulić, 2004, p.160.

129 Alvarez, 1997, p. 169.

130 Ibidem, 169

Consequently, we said that by defining certain people as less than human, they are moved outside the circle of moral obligations. It means that they are excluded by the set of people to whom a fair treatment is due. To further clarify the moral exclusion, I referred to the work of Albert Bandura: dehumanisation is able to disengage the morality of the perpetrators by excluding their victims from the universe of moral obligations. In order to gain a better understanding on the moral disengagement, we referred to the Neutralisation Theory by Sykes and Matza and identified that the denial of victim and the denial of humanity jointly contribute to the elaboration of the core message of the dehumanising ideology: the targeted group is a treacherous in-human enemy which is necessary and even moral to destroy. It is therefore crucial that these psychological manoeuvres operate throughout the genocidal process, not only to facilitate the perpetration of the crimes, but also to foster an unlimited cycle of violence: before the perpetration, the techniques serve to disengage moral constraints whereas afterwards the inhumane act is rationalized and this rationalization may serve to justify a further neutralisation, facilitating a new perpetration. In the next chapter, I will move from the theoretical level to the practical side to investigate dehumanisation at work, drawing upon different cases of genocide and mass violence.



## Chapter III

### Dehumanisation at work

*“The defendants in this case are charged with murders, tortures, and other atrocities committed in the name of medical science. The victims of these crimes are numbered in the hundreds of thousands. A handful only are still alive; a few of the survivors will appear in this courtroom. But most of these miserable victims were slaughtered outright or died in the course of the tortures to which they were subjected. For the most part they are nameless dead. To their murderers, these wretched people were not individuals at all. They came in wholesale lots and were treated worse than animals<sup>131</sup>”.*

#### 1. **These wretched people were not individuals at all**

These are the words pronounced by Telford Taylor, the principal prosecutor, in the opening of the Doctors Trial, in 1946, the first of the twelve subsequent tribunals held in Nuremberg. Twenty-three defendants were accused of having participated in Hitler's euthanasia program in which 200.000 mentally and physically disabled people were gassed to death as well as of having performed atrocious medical experiments on thousands of Jewish, Russian, Roma and Polish prisoners. Brigadier Taylor soberly goes on to describe the unbelievable experiments to which these thousands of human “guinea pigs” were subjected: deprivation of oxygen to simulate the high altitude,

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131 IMT (International Military Tribunal), Thursday, December 9th, 1946, opening Statement of the prosecution in the Doctors Trial by Brig. General Telford Taylor. Harvard Law School Library, *Nuremberg Trials Project. A digital document collection available*, p.12. online at:[http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/php/docs\\_swi.php?DI=1&text=overview](http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/php/docs_swi.php?DI=1&text=overview)

frozen, forced to drink seawater, infested with malaria, typhus and other deadly diseases, wounded and infected to induce gangrene, poisoned and burned with phosphorus<sup>132</sup>. All these “experiments” happened under the accurate supervision of the medical personnel who took note of their screams and convulsions, as if they were animals, even worse than animals. At this point we understand what Taylor meant by saying that: “to their murderers, these wretched people were not individuals at all”. They were not considered human beings and, according to that belief, they were consequently treated.

I resorted to this quotation because I believe it could offer an insightful view on the way in which dehumanisation concretely affects the victims. In this chapter I will in fact investigate dehumanisation at work. I will firstly consider how the language concretely manifests the dehumanising ideology. Consequently, I will consider how the humanity of the victims is stripped away also through other symbolic means, especially the dehumanising images of the targeted group. Finally, I will inquire how the process impacts also the physical level, namely the way in which the victims are treated.

## **2. Dehumanising language**

Previously I dealt at theoretical level with the role of neutralisation techniques in disengaging perpetrators' morality. I argued that, through the combination of the denial of victim and the denial of humanity, the core message spread in the genocidal context is that the targeted group represents a treacherous inhumane enemy which is necessary to suppress. In all genocidal contexts, the language indeed always displays dehumanising features: the dehumanisation of certain groups of individuals can be tracked down in the words used to describe them. In all the cases the ideological construction of the dehumanised target entails the comparison with repulsive creatures, both animals- especially filthy ones like apes, rats, dogs or insects- and diseases infecting the body of the state. For the Nazi Germans, the Jews, the Slavs and the Gypsies were a disease infecting the body of the state and were depicted as apes, pigs,

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<sup>132</sup>Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 14-15.

rats, worms, bacilli<sup>133</sup>. Similar features can be found also in the propaganda against Kulaki elaborated by Soviet regime: the Kulaki- which is already a degrading term because it means "tight-fisted"- were called snakes, bloodsuckers, spiders and vermin<sup>134</sup>. The same was felt by the Turks in regards to the Armenians: they traditionally identified them as well as other non-Muslim minorities with filthy animals like rats, dogs and pigs<sup>135</sup>. Similarly, in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouges called those suspected of being internal enemies worms, germs, termites and weevils infecting the society<sup>136</sup>. Tutsi in Rwanda were also labelled rats, vermin, snakes and sometimes weeds, but were typically depicted as monkeys and gorillas and vicious flesh-eating monsters<sup>137</sup>. Moreover, they were labelled hyenas because this is an animal considered extremely filthy and disgusting, but also very dangerous<sup>138</sup>. In other cases, individuals are compared to treacherous devils and supernatural evil spirits: during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, for example, those suspected of being class enemies were called cow ghosts and snake spirits that in Chinese folklore are supernatural evil creatures disguised in the shape of men<sup>139</sup>.

Animals or diseases, Jews do not belong to humankind nor do the Tutsi or Armenians. It would be extremely difficult to mistreat humanised people without risking personal distress and self- condemnation. For this reason, “as a consequence of the propaganda that deprives a group of its identity as human beings- according to Alvarez- killing them no longer violates the religious and philosophical traditions whereby human life is pronounced sacred and special<sup>140</sup>”. Since they do not belong to humankind, every empathetic link between fellow human beings should be suppressed when dealing with the dehumanised group. As simply stated by the eighth Hutu commandment “ Hutu must stop taking pity on the Tutsi<sup>141</sup>”. They cannot, in fact,

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133 Hitler repeatedly calls them germs, agents of diseases, decomposing agent, fungus or maggot.

Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 146.

134 *Ivi*, p. 147.

135 *Ivi*, p. 145.

136 *Ivi*, p. 149.

137 *Ivi*, p. 153.

138 *Ibidem*.

139 *Ivi*, p. 148.

140 Alvarez, 1997, p. 167.

141 “Appeal to the Bahutu Conscience with The Hutu Ten Commandments”p. 8 in *Kangura*, No.6,6<sup>th</sup>

evolve nor change. They cannot be modified or purified. Their in-human condition is unchangeable. The only possibility is to get rid of them. In this sadly-known article published on the Rwandan magazine *Kangura*, responsible for sparking genocidal propaganda among the Hutu, the Tutsi are defined as so:

*“We began by saying that a cockroach gave birth to a butterfly. It is true. A cockroach gives birth to another cockroach...The story of Rwanda shows us clearly that a Tutsi stays always exactly the same, that he has never changed. (...) They are all linked... their evilness is the same<sup>142</sup>”.*

Since the fact that they are nothing but filthy creatures, parasites or infections, their annihilation becomes a sort of surgical- hygienic operation, an “operation insecticide<sup>143</sup>” as it was called by Hutu in a secret military operation against the Tutsi. This “sanitised<sup>144</sup>” language, that exhibits a shift from the genocidal act to a medical operation, is an extremely dangerous feature of the symbolic dehumanisation. According to Bandura, in fact, activities can take different appearances depending on what they are called and thus also a harmful conduct can be made respectful<sup>145</sup>. This “special language of camouflage and deception<sup>146</sup>” is a specific feature of genocidal activities that serves not only to hide actions but also to make them acceptable: by giving a euphemistic label to an actual massacre, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnance<sup>147</sup>. It is possible for instance to observe this shift from an actual bloodshed to a medical operation in what Konrad Lorenz, the famous Austrian

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December 1990. Available online at:

<http://www.rwandafile.com/Kangura/pdf/k06,23,26,28,33,40,41,46,59.pdf> (Transcription in English for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda- ICTR).

142 “Editorial: A Cockroach Cannot Bring Forth a Butterfly”, p. 53 in *Kangura*, No.40, February 1993 . Available online at: <http://www.rwandafile.com/Kangura/pdf/k40.pdf> (Transcription in English and French for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda- ICTR).

143 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 152.

144 Typical of every context of violence. Look for instance: Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003, p.30: "The language of apartheid".

145 Bandura, 2002, p.104.

146 Alvarez, 1997, p.160.

147 Bandura, 2002, p. 104.

ethnologist and zoologist, wrote in an article for *Der Biologe*:

*“There is a certain similarity between the measures which need to be taken when we draw a broad biological analogy between bodies and malignant tumours on the one hand and a nation and individuals within it who have become asocial because of their defective constitution, on the other hand... Fortunately, the elimination of such elements is easier for the public health physician and less dangerous for the supra-individual organism, than such an operation by a surgeon would be for the individual organism<sup>148</sup>”.*

The groups that do not fit in the eugenic utopia of Nazi Germany are compared by the scientist to a malignant tumour: “Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind<sup>149</sup>”. In many other cases, scientists contributed to compare the genocidal violence with a surgical operation necessary to heal an infected state. In Armenia, for instance, Mehmed Resid, professor of legal medicine at Istanbul Medical School, had a leading role in the genocide and served the cause with all his “scientific” expertise. He declared that “the Armenians had become hazardous microbes in the body of this country. Well, isn’t it a doctor’s duty to kill microbes?<sup>150</sup>”. Another example can be taken from the genocide that occurred in Cambodia in the 1970's. The Khmer Rouge gigantic and horrendous experiment of social engineering, obsessed with purity and founded on “cleanliness”, aimed at the extirpation of the contaminative elements: a popular party slogan was

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148 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.65.

149 Smeulers and Grunfeld, 2011, p.184. Also Fritz Klein, another SS doctor mentioned in Alvarez, 2001, p. 126: “Out of respect for a human life I would remove a purulent appendix from a diseased body.

The Jews are the purulent appendix in the body of Europe”.

150 Mentioned in Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 145.

“what is infected must be cut out<sup>151</sup>”. Men and women were slaughtered because they were responsible for carrying the Vietnamese virus and thus being “pests buried within the state<sup>152</sup>”. It is not a case, thus, that in genocidal contexts the euphemisms used are mainly composed of scientific, medical and technical terms: it is in fact a “non-judgemental, unemotional, and unbiased<sup>153</sup>” language that does not constitute a threat for the perpetrators, perpetuating the conviction of the inhumanity of the victims.

In genocidal contexts, thus, a sanitised language very often shapes the way in which the actual massacre is described. However, instead of being described as a medical “issue”, the extermination of the dehumanised group can otherwise be depicted as a human crusade against a satanic, in-humane enemy:

*“We would insult the animals if we describe these mostly Jewish men as beasts. They are the embodiment of the satanic and insane hatred against the whole of noble humanity... the rebellion of the sub-humane against noble blood<sup>154</sup>”.*

The massacre becomes a holy mission, necessary to “build a more beautiful and eternal Germany for our children and our children's children<sup>155</sup>”. The genocide, in fact, very often is described as a moral duty as well a legitimate right to protect the in-group from a perfidious enemy: the aim is “wiping out of existence the Armenians- for instance- who have for centuries been constituting a barrier to the Empire's progress and civilization<sup>156</sup>”. The mission is rising as one man because “anyone whose neck you do not cut is the one who will cut your neck<sup>157</sup>”, as said by Léon Mugusera in 1992. Or as

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151 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.150.

152 *Ibidem*.

153 Alvarez, 1997, p. 162. Also in relation to euthanasia programme in Smeulers and Grunfeld, 2011, p.

184: “There was no killing... this is not murder, it is putting to sleep”.

154 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.141.

155 Alvarez, 1997, p. 163.

156 Staub, 1989, p. 183.

157 Speech made by Léon Mugusera at a meeting held in Kabaya on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1992. The George Washington University, The National Security Archives, available online at: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1391813-footnote-27-speech-by-leon-mugusera.html>

Himmler said to the officers commanding the *Einsatzgruppen*:

*“Most of you will know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when there are 500, or when there are 1000. And to have seen this through, and -with the exception of human weaknesses - to have remained decent, has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned<sup>158</sup>”.*

As we tried to emphasize, by the means of a dehumanising language, the perception of reality can be manipulated<sup>159</sup>. Killing becomes in this way a justifiable, even heroic act. Language is profoundly implicated in all human social activity<sup>160</sup> and can be understood as a transformative process: it does not only add information, but it modifies the mode of thinking thus deeply affecting reality<sup>161</sup>. Verbal activity in fact does not only designate something, it actually does something: language constitutes action<sup>162</sup>. It is a very specific engagement in “ a rule-governed form of behaviour” that actually produces transformations in reality . Utterance can hence be interpreted as a form of action and the verbal activity can also be called “speech act”<sup>163</sup>. In genocidal contexts, speech acts alter the social relationship between people: widely supporting the dehumanisation of the targeted group, they ease in fact the disengagement of morality of the perpetrators, facilitating in this way the enforcement of the killings itself. Notwithstanding the role of speech acts, others means exist able to disengage the individual constraints against ruthless behaviours and I will consider it in the next section.

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158 Heinrich Himmler's Poznan speech of October 4th, 1943 available online at: <http://www.holocaust-history.org/himmler-poznan/speech-text.shtml>

159 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 184.

160 Chilton, 1997, pp. 174 and 187.

161 Carol Cohn quoted by Alvarez, 2001, p. 119.

162 Chilton, 1997, p. 189.

163 *Ivi*, p. 175.

### 3. Symbolic dehumanisation and the role of images

In the genocidal context, thus, victims are always degraded through the use of dehumanising language and degrading labelling. It means that they are symbolically dehumanised. A symbol is a shape or sign used as conventional representation of an object, function or process and it is significant only in terms of what is being represented or implied<sup>164</sup>. In the case of dehumanisation, the targeted subject is represented notably in language but also by other symbols that deprive him of his humanness, excluding him at the same time from the humankind. In relation to symbolisation, Stanton said that all cultures have categories to distinguish people into “us and them” by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality and that names or other symbols are attributed to this classifications<sup>165</sup>. In fact, " we name people “Jews” or “Gypsies”, or distinguish them by colours or dress; and apply the symbols to members of groups <sup>166</sup>". Stanton argues that, even if symbolization is a universally human phenomenon, when combined with dehumanising features becomes a crucial stage in the genocidal process: "when combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups: the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule, the blue scarf for people from the Eastern Zone in Khmer Rouge Cambodia<sup>167</sup>".

As we already investigated, the language plays a relevant role in negatively symbolizing the victims by depicting them as animals, demonizing or in any case demeaning them through the use of verbally abusive terms. Nevertheless, besides the role of language, also other signs have a powerful role in the process of dehumanisation of a targeted group. They are able in fact to symbolically embody an entire dehumanising discourse. By portraying victims according to dehumanising features, in fact, they are perceived as a perfidious enemy threatening individuals' well-being or the society as a whole. Recalling the definition of speech act as verbal activity that produces reality, I would define that in genocidal context the process of dehumanisation can be

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164 Oxford English Dictionary, 2003, entry "symbol".

165 Stanton, 2013 available online at: <http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html>

166 *Ibidem*.

167 *Ibidem*.



described as a series of “symbolic acts”: symbols that, once elaborated and spread, so heavily impact people's beliefs that need to be somehow considered as already genocidal acts. There are indeed certain symbolic signs that are necessary conditions in the initiation and maintaining of a violent conflict: genocide, in fact, would never be perpetrated unless certain symbolic practices constitute the “conceptualisation” of it<sup>168</sup>.

We already focused on language. I will now briefly address another set of symbolic signs: the images. I decided to address the role of visualization because image is a crucial instrument at the service of genocidal ideology. There would be plenty of examples on the role that dehumanisation plays in the genocidal figurative propaganda: dehumanising images have been largely used in almost every genocidal society, spread through the newspapers, in posters or cartoons. However, in my research, I will only focus on two cases deduced by the Nazi propaganda. I choose them because I think that they could give an insightful overview of the relevance of visualization in genocidal contexts.

The first case is an interesting one because it does not involve the usual massive propaganda spread by genocidal regimes through the media and aimed at an adult public: this time the target is the youngest population and stereotyping images are clearly oriented to shape the beliefs of school children. I am referring to the anti-Semitic cartoons published during the Nazi regime in school-books<sup>169</sup>. In obedience to the Nazi educational propaganda, teachers had to teach the children the racial theory and kids were asked to read texts in which Jews were depicted in an extremely negative light. The aim was “to create a dehumanised conception of Jews among students by means of providing them with required texts that were colourful and visually told provocative narratives<sup>170</sup>”. The originator of this idea was Julius Streicher, the editor of *Das Sturmer*, a weekly newspaper that spread anti-Semitic propaganda in Nazi Germany, by portraying Jews as an in-human race threatening the German society. Its powerful

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168 For more information look at Chilton's work on the role of language in human conflicts: Chilton, 1997.

169 More insightful information available on Zimbardo's website:  
<http://www.lucifereffect.com/dehumanisation.htm>.

170 *Ibidem*.

statements were basically translated into children-friendly cartoons. Total indoctrination had indeed to work already in the young minds: “The use of stereotyped conceptions of Jews as lecherous old men seducing young Aryan women, of dirty Jewish butchers, unscrupulous Jewish lawyers, hard-hearted Jewish landlords, rich Jewish business men and their wives ignoring the poverty around them, all combined to create a hate-filled image of Jews<sup>171</sup>”. To refer to the already mentioned framework, Jews are depicted as lacking those qualities that constitute the fundamental features of human beings. Their “goals and values<sup>172</sup>” are not human ones: they are cunning, treacherous, dirty and perverse creatures. They are the deceivers of the Great Germany, the internal traitors. Besides their identity, Jews are also deprived of community: they are so different from the Aryans because they do not belong to the same humanity. For this reason moral reasoning does not apply to them.



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171 <http://www.lucifereffect.com/dehumanisation.htm>

172 Look at Chapter I, note 20.



The second meaningful example I would like to resort to, is the depiction of the dehumanised group as an undifferentiated, murky mass in a scene from the German movie *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew). In the documentary, the Jews are characterised as an immutable racial parasite, contrasting with the Nazi ideal: while Aryan finds pleasure in physical labour and creation of value, Jews only crave money and live in bug-infested and dirty homes, even though they could afford better<sup>173</sup>.

In the most notorious scene of the film Jews are portrayed as a repugnant swarm of rats. They emerge from sewers and infest bags of grain, pouring after out in the streets while the voice of the narrator says:

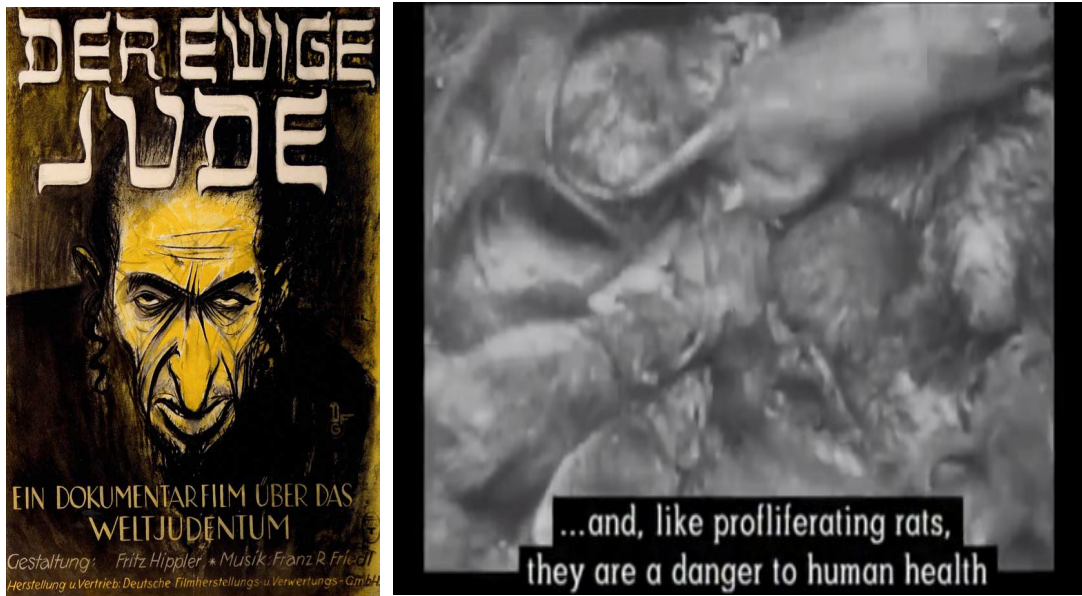
*“Wherever rats appear they bring ruin, by destroying mankind's goods and foodstuff. In this way, they spread disease, plague, leprosy, typhoid fever, cholera, dysentery, and so on. They are cunning, cowardly. And cruel, and are found mostly in large packs. Among the animals, they represent the rudiment of an insidious and underground destruction, just like the Jews among human beings<sup>174</sup>”.*

*The Eternal Jew* was a key instruments in Nazi propaganda. Every German at that time was required to watch the movie, becoming “aware” of both the evil and wicked features of the Jews and their sameness. The dehumanising propaganda depicted them, in fact, as a filthy, decayed swarm threatening the purity of the pure German blood. To resort one more time to Kelman's framework, their community is denied: they do not belong to the humankind, they are nothing but an anonymous heap of grimy beasts to be annihilated.

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173 Lisciotto, 2009 on the website of Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team (HEART) available online at: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/nazprop.html>.

174 Livingston Smith, 2011, p.139.



Dehumanising symbolization is a crucial stage in the process of genocide. Systems of beliefs do not change in fact as rapidly as the laws and the regimes do. In order to be perpetrated, mass violence needs to be firstly conceived in individuals' minds, but it is not an easy task to change a moral system. For this reason, genocide must be taught. That is what the language, the images and the other symbols, as for instance the yellow star imposed by Nazi to Jews, aimed for: the deadly power of the genocidal message must become in some way a familiar concept that is “no more remarkable than the concept of drinking beer with friends<sup>175</sup>”. Dehumanising language and visualization must be both present in the official discourse and in the entertainment one, in the public sphere as well as at private level. They must be repetitive and able to reach all social classes. They serve to condense genocidal ideology into a clear, strong symbolic message able to sum up all the dehumanising features to be spread through the media, the official pronouncements and during every social event. The symbolic dehumanisation, in fact, has a crucial role in constructing a normative framework for legitimizing and, consequently, mobilizing people in the genocidal campaign: the genocidal ideology must become the sole lens through which to interpret the current

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<sup>175</sup>Fujii, 2004, p.105.

situation and according to which react. However, besides the symbolic dehumanisation, also the annihilation must be perpetrated in a way that continuously reaffirms the distance between the in-group and the sub-humane out-group: the dehumanised subjects should not be treated in a “human” way nor killed using “human” weapons. I will address thus the physical dehumanisation in the next section.

#### **4. Physical dehumanisation**

Symbolic dehumanisation has thus a great relevance in the perpetration of most atrocious crimes: language and images, spread through the monopolized media and covering every discursive field, have in fact a deep influence in the way in which reality is interpreted by the people. If dehumanisation is like a "cortical cataract that clouds one's thinking and fosters the perception that other people are less than human"<sup>176</sup>, language and images are the *media* through which the reality is interpreted and symbolized in dehumanising terms.

However dehumanisation should not only impact the way in which the individuals are linguistically or visually depicted at symbolic level. It should also address the physical level, becoming crucial in guiding the pragmatic aspects of violence and annihilation. The physical dehumanisation requires that the victims, already stripped of their humanness and belonging to humankind by the dehumanising symbolization, are further degraded in the carrying out of the genocidal acts. In the genocidal violence, in fact, victims are usually subjected to any kind of torture and degrading treatments. In this manner, their filth and insalubrious appearance itself deeply contributes to deprive them of their identity and community, further distancing them from the group of perpetrators. Treating the victims of genocidal violence according to human standards would, in fact, seriously undermine the whole ideological structure. Dehumanising ideologies are fragile ones due to the fact that they lead humans to act against their own normative and moral system. The mechanisms that enable the disengagement of morality in regards to a specific group are extremely precarious. In the genocidal

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<sup>176</sup>Zimbardo, available online at: <http://www.lucifereffect.com/dehumanisation.htm>.

context, everything risks indeed to impact perpetrators' conscience: in every gaze, every gesture, every voice the denied humanity of the victims may come to light, compromising the ideological architecture. Therefore it is necessary to maintain the dehumanising features also in the carrying out of the “annihilation”: thinking of others as sub-humans requires sophisticated cognitive machinery<sup>177</sup>. For this reason, in the attempt to effectively reflect genocidal ideologies, the enforcement of mass violence should be dehumanising in itself: every aspect of the operation must contribute to detach the victims' humanity. The degrading and humiliating treatments go therefore far beyond the sadistic intent of torturing the victims. They help indeed “the participants to carry out their duties, by successfully transforming the victims into beings who were less than human<sup>178</sup>”.

Dehumanisation should thus imperatively follow the entire implementation of the murderous intent. The whole treatment of the victims, before, during and after the violence, should reverberate the dehumanising process developed at ideological level: since the fact that “these are no longer human beings”, it should be not a “humanitarian task, but a task for a surgeon to solve the problem<sup>179</sup>”. The extermination is not a killing, according to genocidal ideology. The victims therefore have to be “annihilated” in the least “human” way feasible. Brutal slaughters or detached assembly line, it does not matter: it only matters that the perpetrators are not stunned by the humanity of the victims. In the implementation of the genocidal activities, in fact, the relational bond that naturally links fellow human beings is denied in order to disengage the moral normative system of the perpetrators. The victimiser considers himself as a human being whereas this labelling is denied to the victim. They do not belong to the same humanity. To maintain this ontological separation between the perpetrators and the targeted group, the choice of the arms of mass extermination is thus crucial: they serve to restate over and over again the distance between the community of men to which the perpetrators belong and the in-humane nature of the targeted out-group. Moreover victims are often obliged to dig their own grave or to rape and kill the dear ones in the

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177 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.69.

178 Alvarez, 1997, p.168.

179 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.138.

hope to be spared, to amuse the victimisers in the most demeaning way or to fulfil the most sacrilegious tasks: those cruelties serve to further enhance the perpetrators' blame in regards to these hopeless, barbarian or vicious creatures.

During the colonization of what is now the nation of Namibia, General Lothar Von Trotha tailored his military strategy to the perceived status of the rebel Hereros: “Against non humans- he said- one cannot conduct war humanely<sup>180</sup>”. Many of them were burned alive or slaughtered as animals. Others were driven into the Kalahari desert and made to drink from poisoned water holes. An official report stated: “Like a wounded beast the enemy was tracked down from one water hole to the next until finally became the victim of his own environment<sup>181</sup>”. Around 60.000 Hereros, 10.000 Namas and 250.000 others were butchered by the German colonialists in that fashion.

Death marches also lead the Armenians into the Syrian desert, without food, water or shelter. They were obliged to walk, raped, assaulted and killed by the hunger and by the Turks themselves along the way. Those few that reached the final destination were then massacred. They were rarely shot: bullets were too valuable for Turks to waste on sub-humane creatures.

This reflection concerning the most suitable weapon to massively kill the dehumanised group also recurs in the Holocaust. The destruction process was an organized undertaking which had room only for organized tasks: the maximum destructive effect was to be achieved with minimum destructive effort<sup>182</sup>. It means that, differently from other mass atrocities, in the Nazi genocide there was no space for barbaric and fierce bloodsheds. Atrocities could have risked to bring the entire “noble” work into disrepute<sup>183</sup>, so opportunities for “excesses” of all sorts had to be avoided. According to Hildberg, much research was aimed to develop devices and methods that limited uncontrolled behaviours and at the same time lightened the psychological burden of the slaughter: “the construction of vans and gas chambers, the employment of Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Latvian auxiliaries to kill Jewish women and children, the

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180 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p.141.

181 *Ivi*, p.143.

182 Hilberg, 2002, p.175.

183 *Ibidem*.



use of Jews for the burial and burning of bodies<sup>184</sup>”, all these efforts aimed to avoid any contact with the dying victims<sup>185</sup>. Moreover they further confirmed their inhumanity and diverted at the same time the moral responsibility of the perpetrators<sup>186</sup>. That is how the Nazi defeated the “lingering effect of two thousands years of Western morality and ethics<sup>187</sup>”.

In his *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman refers to the “dehumanisation of the objects of bureaucratic operation<sup>188</sup>”:

*“Once effectively dehumanised, and hence cancelled as potential subjects of moral demands, human objects of bureaucratic task-performance are viewed with ethical indifference which soon turns into disapprobation and censure when their resistance, or lack of cooperation, slows down the smooth flow of bureaucratic routine<sup>189</sup>”.*

It means that subjects, already deprived of their humanity through the symbolic dehumanisation, were at the same time dehumanised by the rationalizing Nazi bureaucracy. They were rounded up and transported as a herd and held prisoners in grim conditions. Ultimately, the killing become a meticulous and functional machinery that, once set in motion, simply developed its own impetus<sup>190</sup>: death was industrialized following the principle of instrumental rationality. The annihilation sought the optimal solution: as a SS declared, “one does not hunt rats with a revolver, but with poison and gas<sup>191</sup>”. For this reason, the treatment to which the prisoners were subjected can be defined dehumanising: not only because of its savagery, but due to the fact that the human beings were considered merely as pieces. As two survivors of Sobibor related:

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184 Hilberg, 2002, p. 179. Look for instance at the role of Sonderkommandos during the Holocaust.

185 Alvarez, 1997, p. 161.

186 According to Levi: "It must be shown that the Jews, the sub-race, the sub-men, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves". Quoted by Glover, 2012, p. 343.

187 Hilberg, 2002, p.178.

188 Bauman, 1989, p. 102.

189 *Ibidem*.

190 *Ivi*, p. 106.

191 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 145.

*“The dead were blocks of wood, shit, with absolutely no importance. Anyone who said 'corpse' or 'victim' was beaten. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as Figuren, that is, puppets, as dolls, or as Schmattes, which means rags<sup>192</sup>”.*

They were simply a cargo to be processed through the gas chambers and the crematoria.

According to the testimonies of the survivors, also the Khmer Rouge, in Cambodia, treated the victims “worse than cattle” , because they were “less than garbage<sup>193</sup>”. In Tuol Seng, the prison in Phnom Penh where agents of Pol Pot tortured and killed approximately 17.000 detainees, the prisoners were considered lower forms of life: “Killing us was like swatting flies, a way of get rid of undesirable<sup>194</sup>”. One witness describes as a man, killed by an axe, was even eaten:

*“ The cadre (...) opened up the man's chest, he took out the liver. One man exclaimed, 'One man's liver is another man's food'. Then a second man quickly placed the liver on an old stump where he sliced and fried it in a pan with pig grease... when the liver was cooked, the cadre leader took out two bottles of rice-distilled whisky, which they drank cheerfully<sup>195</sup>”.*

Considering now the genocidal violence in Rwanda, it is believed that the machete was the prime instrument of killing during the genocide: it was in fact a common agricultural tool owned by most Rwandan households and thus highly accessible<sup>196</sup>. Ordinary farmers were told to participate in the “self-defence” with their own farming

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192 Quoted in Alvarex, 2001, p. 119.

193 Livingstone Smith, 2011, p. 150.

194 Ivi, p. 151.

195 Ibidem.

196 Verwimp, 2006: "83% of rural households owned one or more machetes at the time of the National Agricultural Household Survey (1984)".

tools. It was easy way to militarise the rural population<sup>197</sup> because every single person in Rwanda knew how to properly use them. However, besides their effectiveness and availability, machetes also had a deeply symbolic value<sup>198</sup>. According to Fallon:

*“Tutsi were in fact often referred to as 'tall trees', as a play on their height and lengthened features. As the machete was most mundanely used to cut tall trees, projecting this image onto the Tutsi suggests to the Hutu militia that cutting down Tutsi is just what they are meant to do with their machete its natural. Continuing this imagery, the killing of Tutsi was also directly referred to as 'bush clearing' and the 'pulling out of the roots of the bad weeds' further instilling the concept that bringing down the machete on the Tutsi was just another everyday mundanity and also the proper use of a machete<sup>199</sup>”.*

In this sense, the use of the machete further restated the dehumanisation of victims.

In a different way, dehumanising features characterized also the concentration camp of the former Yugoslavia. At Omarska, in Bosnia, Bosnian Muslims and Croats were fiercely tortured and subjected to all kind of humiliations: they were crowded together for months in cramped quarters without sanitary facilities, starved and constantly beaten through the use of “clubs, thick electrical cable, rifle butts, fists, brass knuckle-dusters, iron rods<sup>200</sup>”. Besides the violence and the physical sufferance, the dehumanisation process involved the most degrading treatments. The prisoners were completely infested with lice. In the hot summers days, the guards threw small bottles of water just to joke around the savage struggle among the prisoners. They were so thirsty that “when somebody took a leak, the others gathered around to cup their hands and catch the urine,

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197 Verwimp, 2006, p. 6. Also Des Forges, 1999, pp. 23-4: “In his radio speeches, four days after the February 1993 attack by the RPF, President Habyarimana advocated a self-defence force armed with traditional weapons, an idea he repeated in a speech to army commanders on 13 March when he called for the population to ‘organise to defend itself’”.

198 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 199.

199 Fallon, 2013.

200 Hirsch, 2003, p.67.

wetting their chapped lips with it and even drinking it<sup>201</sup>”.

In the Tadić trial, the violence is described as follow:

*“The white house was a place of particular horror. One room in it was reserved for brutal assaults on prisoners, who were often stripped, beaten, and kicked and otherwise abused. Many died as a result of these repeated assaults on them. Prisoners who were forced to clean up after the beatings reported finding blood, teeth, and skin of victims on the floor. Dead bodies of prisoners, lying in heaps on the grass near the white house, were a not infrequent sight. Those bodies would be thrown out of the white house and later loaded into trucks and removed from the camp<sup>202</sup>”.*

However Omarska, Trnopolje and Keraterm were quite different from the Nazi camps, at least according to Bauman's description of the concentration and extermination camps as obeying the principles of scientific and dispassionate rationality<sup>203</sup>. There was instead no bureaucracy and no specific technology in the former- Yugoslavia camps: there, the killings were as passionate as inefficient. Sometimes, in fact, it took several days to kill a single prisoner.

A recurring feature in genocidal violence is what Glover calls the cold joke and the desecration of victims<sup>204</sup>. The contemptuous laugh, in fact, does not only express through verbal jokes. According to the testimonies, the Serb guards were drunk and laughed while they were committing the most horrible tortures. They amused themselves by forcing prisoners to sing for them and by addressing them with mocking

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201 Hukanovich in Hirsch, 2003, p.67.

202 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor vs. Tadić, par. 166.

Also *ivi*, par. 167: "The red house was another small building where prisoners were taken to be beaten and killed. When prisoners were required to clean the red house, they often found hair, clothes, blood, footwear, and empty pistol cartridges. They also load onto trucks bodies of prisoners who had been beaten and iled in the red house". Available online at <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/tadic/tjug/en/tad-tsj70507JT2-e.pdf>.

203 Bauman, 1989.

204 Glover, 2012, p.340.

and ironic comments while they were slaughtering them. The Serb soldiers visited Omarska at the weekends to torture and kill Muslims: it was a way to chill out after the efforts of the war at the front<sup>205</sup>. Also other visitors were allowed to visit the camps and kill some prisoners<sup>206</sup>: people were treated like animals, exhibited and butchered as preys in a hunting game. Also in the Nazi death camps cold jokes occurred, often causing the death of the prisoners: shooting Jews was treated for instance as a sport. As one victim testified at Eichmann's trial: "On Sundays there was no work, and we were placed in a row; each man had a bottle on his head, and they amused themselves by shooting at the bottles. When the bottle was hit, the man survived, but if the bullet landed below the target, he had had it<sup>207</sup>".

We investigated the role of the dehumanising treatments to which the victims are subjected. However, in coming under those degrading experiences, victims' appearance itself continuously reinforces their perception as in-humane creatures. The dehumanising treatments we already described, in fact, make the victims look increasingly miserable: scrawny, sick and filthy, the victims barely appear human. Moreover, their individuality is denied making the victims hardly distinguishable one from the other. A collective, despised identity must be created in order to constitute the dehumanised group as an undifferentiated mass of people. During the Holocaust, for instance, immediately upon the arrival in the concentration and extermination camps, those who were not chosen for the immediate annihilation in the gas chambers were subjected to a strict procedure: all their baggages were confiscated. They were stripped of all their clothes and dressed by the camp uniform, a humiliating and grimy piece of cloth. They were all shaved, men and women. In the camp everyone had to forget his or her profession, the social status, the education. Even the name. The prisoners had to answer only to a number, tattooed on the arm. The only left identity. This made things

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205 Hirsch, 2003, p.69.

206 Winton, 2011, p.375.

207 Glover, 2012, p. 341. Ironically sad, these features recur also in non properly genocidal contexts. Glover, 2012, p.50 reports that in the Gulf War the killing of thousands of retreating enemy soldiers was described as a 'turkey shoot'. A lieutenant-colonel in the U.S. Army said that "it was like turning on the kitchen light late at night and the cockroaches started scurrying...We finally got them out where we could kill them".

easier for those in charge, by confirming the belief that the prisoners were sub-human<sup>208</sup>. In the Bosnian camps, weeks in starvation, lack of water and hygiene turned captives into filthy, emaciated shadows of the persons they had once been, wrote Sells in relation to the treatment of Bosnian Muslims<sup>209</sup>. The appearance of humanity was therefore lost, self-reinforcing their definition as non-humans: as the widow of the commandant of Plascow, a Nazi camp in Polonia, told an interviewer “They were not human like us. They were so foul<sup>210</sup>”.

## 5. Conclusion

In this third chapter I analysed how language in genocidal contexts always tackles down dehumanising features. Since the fact that linguistic dehumanisation impacts the way in which victims are symbolically depicted, I then focused more broadly on the role of dehumanising symbols in the process of genocide, especially on the strength of degrading images. Consequently I argued that the dehumanisation should imperatively follow the entire implementation of the genocide: treating the victims “humanely” would, in fact, seriously undermine the whole operation. I therefore analysed the physical dehumanisation and more specifically the role of the treatment to which the victims are subjected.

All these features, the symbolic as well as the physical ones, are crucial in continuously reiterating the in-humanity of victims: dehumanisation is in fact an unavoidable feature not only of genocidal ideology, but also of the perpetration of the crime itself due to its relevance in further confirming the inhumanity of victims in the eyes of perpetrators. It is not established by a single act. The phenomenon is indeed better understood as a continuum of dehumanisation<sup>211</sup>, constituted by a series of acts, from the more subtle form of symbolic labelling to the brutality of treatments. However,

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208 Glover, 2012, p. 342.

209 Alvarez, 2001, p. 128.

210 *Ivi*, p. 127.

211 Staub, 1989, coined the original expression “continuum of destructiveness”, which refers to the genocidal process.

dehumanisation is an “interpersonally enacted phenomenon<sup>212</sup>” that does not exclude perpetrators: according to Kelman, in fact, the process progressively impacts also the victimisers themselves, as they are part of this continuum. In the last chapter I will therefore focus on the dehumanisation of perpetrators.

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212 Bastian, Jetten & Haslam, 2014, p. 205.





## **Chapter IV**

### **Dehumanisation of Perpetrators**

*“In this way, therefore, all that falls away from the good, ceases also to exist, wherefore evil men cease to be what they were. The form of their human bodies still proves that they have been men; wherefore they must have lost their human nature when they turned to evil-doing. (...) evil of necessity will thrust down below the honourable estate of humanity those whom it casts down from their first position. The result is that you cannot hold him to be a man who has been, so to say, transformed by his vices. (...) Thus then a man who loses his goodness, ceases to be a man, and since he cannot change his condition for that of a god, he turns into a beast”.*

Boetius, De Consolatione Philosophiae<sup>213</sup>, ~ 523 d. C.

#### **Evil men cease to be what they were**

Severinus Boetius, a philosopher of the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, in his imaginary dialogue with the personification of Philosophy, affirms that those who act evilly immediately cease to exist as men: their human nature is lost in their evil-doing. There are thus vices that transform the men, driving them down below the humanity. Besides the moral value of his thoughts, from the psychological perspective we can agree to a certain extent with Boetius' view. Dehumanisation is such a powerful psychological force that it outweighs the moral constraints that would normally make people refrain from violent behaviours. However, at the same time, it is a process that heavily affects the perpetrators themselves.

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<sup>213</sup> Boethius, translated by W.M. Cooper in 1902, pp.113-4.

Dehumanisation has been typically described as a one-way phenomenon in which a majority and dominant group deprives the members of a targeted minority one of their humanity. However, as mentioned above, “dehumanisation can be better understood as an interpersonally enacted phenomenon<sup>214</sup>”, able to tear off humanity from all the parties involved. Since I am persuaded that to understand the genocide means also to comprehend what is behind the perpetration, in this chapter I will consider the way in which dehumanisation impacts the victimisers. If dehumanisation can be interpreted as a continuum, the dehumanisation of perpetrator begins far before the actual genocidal violence. The Violentization Theory by the criminologist Lonnie Athens can offer us an insightful perspective on the developmental process that turns ordinary people into fierce perpetrators and will be thus discussed in relation to genocidal violence. The focus will particularly be on the first stage, the brutalisation: the harsh training to which many perpetrators are subjected will be addressed, trying to identify its dehumanising features. Later, having considered the effects of the dehumanising training on the future torturers and killers, I will resort one more time to Kelman's work, addressing more broadly the issue of the dehumanisation of the victimisers. I will argue in fact that they are deprived of both their identity, understood this time as personal agency, as well as their community, namely the empathy among fellow human beings. To conclude the chapter I will consider the suitability to define these perpetrators “monsters”.

### **Dehumanised by brutalizing training**

Dehumanisation, as we already argued, can be described as a deathly circle: in order to facilitate the violence victims are degraded and humiliated to be perceived as less than human. But, in turn, the degradation and humiliation caused by violence further dehumanize the victims, easing again the violence. Nevertheless, the participation in the genocidal activities does not only increase the dehumanisation of victim: it also increases the dehumanisation of the victimiser himself<sup>215</sup>. According to Kelman, one of

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214 Bastian, Jetten & Haslam, 2014, p. 205.

215 Kelman, 1973, p. 51.

the first scholar to raise the issue:

*“In sanctioned massacres, as the victimiser becomes increasingly dehumanised through the enactment of his role, moral restraints against murder are further weakened. To the extent that he is dehumanised, he loses the capacity to act as a moral being<sup>216</sup>”.*

However, the continuum of dehumanisation begins far before than the actual perpetration of genocidal violence: the humanity of the perpetrators is indeed already stripped away during the training that turns ordinary people into fierce torturers and killers. The victimisers are in fact in most cases nothing more than ordinary people that have been transformed into perpetrators and dehumanisation has an enormous relevance in this process as I will try to unravel. In order to make it insightful, I will refer to the Violentization Theory by Athens, applying it into genocide by resorting to Winton' s work<sup>217</sup>.

According to Athens, people become what they are as a result of social interactions with family, peers and the broader community they belong to. Later experiences are built on previous ones and “the significant experiences which make people dangerous violent criminals do not occur all at once in their life, but occur gradually over time<sup>218</sup>”, following “a developmental process with discernible stages<sup>219</sup>”. The four stages are: brutalisation, belligerency, violent performances and virulency. In the first stage, “one is taught how to engage in violent behaviour through observation and demonstration<sup>220</sup>”. In case of genocide, victimisers may have been previously “physically assaulted, threatened, observed others being threatened or assaulted, and coached how to carry out violent behaviour<sup>221</sup>”. This previous victimisation is often linked with civil wars or mass violences that occurred in the country in the past, leading a large segment of the

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216 Kelman, 1973, p. 51.

217 Reference from Winton,2011.

218 Athens, 1992, p. 20.

219 *Ibidem*.

220 Athens in Winton, 2011, p. 365.

221 *Ibidem*.

population to be exposed to different dimensions of brutalisation<sup>222</sup> and is exploited in order to encourage the current genocide. The next stage, belligerency, occurs when a belief system supportive of violence is presented to the individual: the subject decides to resort to violence if provoked and if it has a good chance of success. In genocidal contexts, this stage is manifested when the perpetrators are increasingly convinced that the resort to violence is justified because it represents a mean to control and dominate a threatening group<sup>223</sup>. In the third step, the violent performance, the individual turns from the resolution to act violently to the actual use of violence. While carrying out genocidal activities, the perpetrators are encouraged or even forced to engage in violent acts, being rewarded for their actions or otherwise punished if they refrain. Finally, the virulency stage happens when someone is ready to resort to violent means as a consequence of a minimal or no provocation. The violentized individuals at this point define themselves as dangerous and “use violence to gain control of others, obtain respect, instil fear, and make their people fear powerless, shamed, and humiliated”<sup>224</sup>. In the perpetration of genocide, this stage may further escalate in extreme virulency by including extreme acts as the most heinous episodes of torture and bloodsheds. According to Winton, thus, the perpetrators of genocide go through the violentization process described by Athens: even if they do not have to go through all the stages to engage in violent behaviour, the most violent ones complete the virulent stage<sup>225</sup>.

This theory provides an insightful developmental approach able to explain various types of violent acts, committed by different groups of people, during different times, and residing in different locations<sup>226</sup>. However, in the light of the present research, I will only focus on the first stage of violentization, the brutalisation phase. I am in fact persuaded that in this first phase perpetrators are exposed to many dehumanising treatments and conditions. According to Athens<sup>227</sup>, in this stage, the subject is threatened to use or actually abused by extreme violence. He also witnesses violent

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222 Winton, 2011, p. 365.

223 *Ibidem*.

224 *Ivi*, p.366.

225 *Ibidem*.

226 *Ivi*, p. 368.

227 Athens, 1992.

treatments to which other people are subjected. The brutalized subject is deeply humiliated and frightened in order to compel his unconditioned obedience. At the end subjection is the only way out, able to provide a great relief to the brutalized individual. Moreover in this phase, the subject is also coached how to resort to the same violent methods he suffered. In the context of genocidal violence, as above mentioned, the brutalisation stage can take the shape of a wide conflict by which all the population is affected. Nevertheless, in many cases, the future perpetrators witness, learn and experience violence even more directly: they are in fact trained to become torturer and killer. According to Smeulers, this kind of perpetrators:

*“... are members of the military, police, secret service or any other specialised and militarised unit and usually have gone through a specifically designed and sometimes extremely coercive training programme in which recruits are disciplined and learn to accept a very strict hierarchy and are taught to obey all order unquestioningly<sup>228</sup>”.*

Referring one more time to Athens' theory, these extremely ruthless training programmes by a military or paramilitary unit can be seen as the first step in the violentization process of the future material perpetrators of the most heinous mass crimes, the brutalisation. During the training, the recruits are completely at the mercy of their superiors<sup>229</sup>: they are physically exhausted to the point of collapse and harshly beaten and maltreated. Moreover they are subjected to a continuous degradation and humiliation, often victims of the same black humour that they will reserve to their future victims. Notwithstanding the rough training, regularly inflicting pain or killing a fellow human being causes a high level of psychological distress. In order to cope with that, the perpetrators learn how to emotionally distance themselves from the pain inflicted to the victims, entirely accepting the rationale for the violence provided by the superiors<sup>230</sup>.

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228 Smeulers, “Perpetrators of International Crimes: towards a Typology”, pp. 233-265 in Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.258.

229 Coercive training programme described by Smeulers *ivi*, pp. 258-260.

230 Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.259.

By doing that, they progressively fall into a state of mind that separates them from reality. Their professional self, the one that obeys orders and perpetrates the most ruthless crimes, is progressively detached by their personal or private self<sup>231</sup>. “ The professional self operates within the professional world in which the individual often wears a uniform and uses nicknames (...) Whereas in the ordinary world it is not right to hurt someone, this moral rule does not apply to the dehumanised enemies whom they target in their professional world<sup>232</sup>”.

The brutalisation stage of the violentization process aims at “break the recruit's personality and to de-individualise and depersonalise them<sup>233</sup>”. At the same time, the recruits start to disregard their own psychological distress and discomfort. But “to disregard your own pain is a mean to learn to disregard the pain of someone else<sup>234</sup>” and, at the end of the training, they are completely desensitised and able to push aside all the feeling that could impede their “job”. They have been conditioned to thoughtlessly obey without any questioning, no matter how extreme and fierce are the orders. This internalised obedience turns the recruits into “instruments of violence and destruction<sup>235</sup>”: they have finally become torturers and killers. They are going to be the professional perpetrators of the genocidal violence. This is the “cruel method in teaching people how to torture. Almost everyone can learn it<sup>236</sup>”. However, in order to turn hundreds of individuals into an effective machine, recruits need to be de-personalised and de-individualised<sup>237</sup>. Their behaviour and appearance is mechanical and functional and they are stripped of individual and personal characteristics: they wear a uniform, they answer when called by a rank rather than by a name, they act as a

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231 This phenomenon is called doubling by Robert-Jay Lifton. Look at Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.116.

232 Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.259. Moreover, Gobodo-Madikizela about Eugene de Kock, 2003, p.38: “two sides of de Kock, one evil, and the other- the one I was more afraid of confronting. A human being capable of feeling, crying, and knowing pain”.

233 Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.258.

234 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 279.

235 Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.259.

236 *Ibidem*. A very well documented research on harshly trained professional torturers can be found in Mika Haritos-Fatouras (“The psychological Origins of Institutionalised Torture”) who describes the training given to the recruits of the military police during the Greek colonels' regime.

237 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 279.

single unit not as individuals<sup>238</sup>. They have to completely break with the old self and its norms and values: the human beings have to be deconstructed and consequently reconstructed as machine. Desensitised towards violence and death, they react to human suffering in a professional and mechanical way: the very human feelings are forbidden and strongly stigmatized<sup>239</sup>. At the end of the brutalisation stage, the perpetrators are transformed in instruments without a will, actually detached from the rest of humanity.

In this section I investigated the most extreme case of violentization, namely the training of military and paramilitary units, where the dehumanising features are particularly evident. However, in a broader sense, dehumanisation effects perpetrators at every level<sup>240</sup>. I will consider it in the next paragraph.

### **Losing personal agency and empathy**

In the case of the recruits trained to become professional torturers or killers, these men at the end of the training become obedient instruments of death and violence in the hands of the superiors. However dehumanisation impacts all kind of perpetrators, not only the sadist executors. To resort one more time to Kelman' s insightful perspective, the scholar said that by participating in the genocidal process, also “the victimiser loses both his sense of personal identity and his sense of community<sup>241</sup>”. In the first chapter, we already established that Kelman' s concept of identity represents the agentive aspect of humanity and includes those human qualities that can be said to constitute the fundamental *humanness* of human beings, whereas the concept of community, the communal aspect, entails the belonging to that “interconnected network of individuals” that can be defined as *humankind*<sup>242</sup>. By dehumanising the victims, thus, the perpetrator is, in a first moment, increasingly deprived of his humanness, namely of his personal

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238 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 268.

239 Ivi, p. 281.

240 For an overview on the different types of perpetrators look at: Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.233 and following.

241 Kelman, 1973, p.51

242 Look at I chapter of this paper. Identity is the agentive aspect of humanity whereas community the relational one.

agency: by thoughtlessly obeying to given orders, he loses the capacity of making choices according to his own will. Consequently, by morally excluding a whole group of people, his involvement in humankind progressively declines<sup>243</sup>, affecting his empathy: the perpetrators are not anymore able to experience emotions that match another person's emotions. On the basis of this framework, I will analyse in details how the perpetrators are deprived of both the human agency and the empathic involvement in humankind, losing their capacity to act as moral beings<sup>244</sup>.

In relation to the denial of the agentive aspect of humanity, the identity, in order to understand how the genocidal process deprives the actors of their human agency, it is insightful to resort to Kelman and Hamilton's definition of crimes of obedience. According to the scholars, these acts can be described as “performed in response to order for authority that are considered illegal or immoral by the international community<sup>245</sup>”. Crimes of obedience happen when the perpetrators are persuaded that their acts are not only discharged, but even authorised by the superior authorities and that in perpetrating the bloodshed they are simply carrying out legitimate orders. In these circumstances, in fact, the perpetrator submits the possibility to make moral choices to an external authority and, due to the unquestioning obedience, he is progressively deprived of his personal agency. It means that, once implicated in the genocidal process, the victimiser is not anymore “an independent actor making judgements and choices on the basis of his own values and assessment of the consequences<sup>246</sup>”. He acts in obedience to conditioned reflexes, not anymore following conscious thinking<sup>247</sup>. He is alienated in his task, carrying out his actions without considering anymore their impact, totally driven by external, powerful forces and unable to recognise himself as a responsible agent. The words of perpetrators can offer a disquieting comprehension of the degree of dehumanisation provoked by the deprivation of agency. Men are progressively transformed into machines executing a

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243 Kelman, 1973, pp.51-2.

244 *Ivi*, pp.52.

245 Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, p. 46.

246 Kelman, 1973, p.51.

247 Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p. 276.



task: “We were just pawns in this. We were just tools<sup>248</sup>” said a Rwandan perpetrator. Perpetrators are thus not anymore able to act as moral being: they simply obey thoughtlessly to superior orders indulging in atrocious crimes. They lose in this way their humanity, in the sense that they are deprived of the agency that characterises human beings: this “special thoughtlessness” is both their awfulest crime and their failure to the essential test of humanity<sup>249</sup>.

Moving now to consider the denial of the communal aspect of humanity, the belonging to human kind, it should be said that interpersonal interactions play an important role in maintaining perception of our own and other's humanity<sup>250</sup>. In the genocidal context, the empathy of the perpetrator is necessarily reduced in order to allow him the enactment of the massacre. This empathic disengagement certainly lets the genocidal violence occur because the perpetrator does not perceive anymore the victims as deserving the fair treatment due to fellow human beings, but it also negatively impacts the way in which the victimiser relates with the community of men. As stated by Kelman, “his sense of involvement in humankind declines<sup>251</sup>” and he can indulge in the most atrocious acts without even being distressed about them. The complete absence of any empathetic reaction is well exemplified by the testimony of a Soviet Gulag survivor, who describes a guard: “He derived no satisfaction from our sufferings. He was simply oblivious to them because in the most sincere way imaginable, he did not regard us as human. Wastage among the convict work force was to him no more than a routine malfunction<sup>252</sup>”. The words of the perpetrators are extremely dismaying: “First I cracked an old mama's skull with a club... I went home that evening without even thinking about it<sup>253</sup>” or “I finished him off in a rush, not thinking of it, even though he was a neighbour<sup>254</sup>” acknowledged Rwandan perpetrators. Telling about the involvement of Dražen Erdemović in the Srebrenica

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248 Alvarez, 2001, p. 116.

249 Arendt mentioned by Roth, 2005, p. 203-4.

250 Bastian, Jetten & Haslam, 2014, p. 207.

251 Kelman, 1973, p.52.

252 Alvarez, 2001, p. 119.

253 Winton, 2011, p. 371.

254 *Ibidem*.

massacre, Slavenka Drakulić wrote: “Now he felt numb, his body as stiff as wood. He felt like a puppet on a string, able only to raise his hands and fire his gun again and again<sup>255</sup>”. The same sensation was also described by a perpetrator of the My Lai massacre, in which nearly 500 Vietnamese civilians were killed in four hours by American soldiers:

*“ (...) after I killed the child, my whole mind just went. And once you start, it's very easy to keep on. Once you start. The hardest- the part that's hard is to kill, but once you kill, hat become easier, to kill the next person and the next one and the next one. Because I had no feelings or no emotions or no nothing. No direction. I just killed. It can happen to anyone<sup>256</sup>”.*

The dehumanisation of perpetrators therefore effects both their free agency and their universe of empathetic relation. In order to make the dehumanisation of perpetrators more insightful, I will refer to Haslam's work<sup>257</sup>. In describing the main features of humanity, the scholar differentiates between uniquely human (UH) characteristics, which distinguish humans from animals, and human nature (HN) characteristics, that are those typical of human beings<sup>258</sup>. Uniquely human characteristics are for instance moral sensibility, rationality or civility while human nature manifests for example in agency, cognitive openness, interpersonal warmth or emotional responsiveness<sup>259</sup>. According to Haslam, two different types of dehumanisation arise from the denial of those two sets of characteristics<sup>260</sup>. The animalistic form of dehumanisation occurs when uniquely human characteristics are denied to a targeted group and it is the kind of dehumanisation we dealt with till now: people are seen as immoral, unintelligent and

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255 Drakulic, 2004, p.104.

256 Glover, 2012, p.62. An other example in the words of a Rwandan perpetrator: "It is as if I had let another individual take on my own living apperance, and the habits of my heart, witout a single pang in my soul. This killer was indeed me (...) but he is a stranger to me in his ferocity. (...) Therefore I aloe do nor recognise myself in that man". Quoted in Alvarez, 2010, p.101.

257 Haslam, 2006.

258 Ivi, p.256.

259 Ivi, p. 257.

260 *Ibidem*.

bestial creatures. On the other side, the mechanistic form occurs when characteristics of human nature are denied: the targets are seen as unemotional and detached, likened to machines or objects. Resorting to Haslam's conceptualisation, I argue that whereas the victims are very often dehumanised by comparison with animals, in the case of victimisers, they are indeed subjected to mechanistic dehumanisation. They lose emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth and cognitive openness, that is their empathy. Moreover, by blindly obeying to superior orders, they progressively lose their free agency and individuality, turning in a sort of automata. In support of this consideration, I will recall the testimony of Rudolf Höss, the commander of Auschwitz: “The goal of the many years of rigid SS training was to make each SS a tool without its own will who could carry out blindly all of Himmler's plans. This is the reason why I also became a blind, obedient robot who carried out every order<sup>261</sup>”.

### **Inhumane monsters or dehumanised men?**

There is a common tendency to attribute these shocking violence to monsters. How could have possibly “normal” people, in fact, indulged into such inhumane crimes? They should have necessarily been devils. Or maybe, psychopaths and sadist as a secular euphemism for evil. Gobodo-Madikizela in relation to the apartheid criminal Eugene de Kock wrote that he “had not just given apartheid's murderous evil a name. He had become that evil<sup>262</sup>”. She said that the first time she met de Kock, “the embodiment of evil stood there politely smiling<sup>263</sup>” at her.

The attempt to demonize the perpetrators of the most horrendous acts is a clear attempt to explain what is barely imaginable<sup>264</sup>. It is in fact troubling to accept that they are ordinary men: it means that everyone could commit these crimes. According to Slavenka Drakulić, who described her experience of observing the trials in the

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261 Höss, 1996. Final Letters to his wife and children, p.189.

262 Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003, p. 6.

263 *Ibidem*.

264 Quoted in Alvarez, 2010, p. 154. According to Bettelheim it is a psychological mechanism that people use to set apart from these cruel perpetrators.

International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), “it is so easy and comfortable to accept that war criminals are monsters<sup>265</sup>”. It is extremely less troubling to depict them as a dark gathering of monsters: it is a way of reassuring ourselves that ordinary people would never do anything like that. However, there is no evidence to support that the majority of those who participate in genocidal violence are sadistically inclined: the attempts to show that the perpetrators of international crimes and other gross human rights violations are mentally deranged people have failed<sup>266</sup>. According to Smeulers, the perpetrators are “ordinary people within extraordinary circumstances<sup>267</sup>” and their behaviour cannot be explained outside the specific circumstances of the context of violence<sup>268</sup> and, I would add, without considering the dehumanisation process. Nevertheless, it should be noted that much of the sadistic behaviour observed in genocidal contexts can be understood as a consequence of participation in the genocidal process with its dehumanising impact, rather than as a motivating force for it<sup>269</sup>. The inhumanity of perpetrators is thus a consequence, not a prerequisite of genocidal violence. Within a period of collective violence, in fact, the perpetrators “slowly progress on a continuum of destructiveness, often without being really aware of it<sup>270</sup>”. It is an escalating downward process that feeds on itself and, eventually, has serious effects on the victimisers themselves: those who at the beginning were not inhumane monsters finally turn into dehumanised men, capable of committing the most unimaginable crimes. But, as Gobodo- Madikizela said about the apartheid criminal Eugene de Koch: “for all the horrific singularity of his acts, he was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe<sup>271</sup>”.

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265 Drakulic, 2004. p. 166.

266 For reference on these studies: Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p. 234, note 2.

267 *Ivi*, p. 234.

268 Already mentioned in chapter I, paragraph 4.

269 Kelman, 1973, p. 36.

270 Smeulers & Haveman, 2008, p.238.

271 Gobodo- Madikizela, 2003, p. 47.

## **Conclusion**

In this fourth and last chapter I investigated how dehumanisation also effects the perpetrators. It is in fact a complex interpersonal phenomenon able to strip away humanity from all the actors involved. The violentization theory offered us an insightful interpretation of the impact that the brutalizing treatments have on future perpetrators. They are in fact conditioned to thoughtlessly obey superior orders and they learn to distance themselves from the pain inflicted to victims. The aim of the harsh training is in fact to break recruits' will and turn them into mere instruments of torture and murder. However, besides the most ruthless ones, every perpetrator involved at every stage of the genocidal process and at every level experiences the effects of dehumanisation. Resorting to Kelman's work, I interpreted the denial of identity as the stripping of the moral agency: the perpetrator is not anymore an independent moral subject able to make judgements and choices. In regards to the denial of community, on the other side, his involvement in humankind progressively decreases affecting the way in which he relates with other fellow human beings. To conclude, I reflected that labelling the perpetrators monsters is a comfortable way to distance them. Nevertheless, there is no evidence at all to support that the majority of those involved in genocidal violence are sadistically inclined. Their in-humanity is not a preceding feature, but rather a consequence of the continuum of dehumanisation. It is the process itself that, by disengaging the constraints against the most atrocious violations, deprives them at the same time of their own humanity.



## Concluding Remarks

*“The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else. The evil and insane SS men, the Kapos, the politicians, the criminals, the prominents, great and small, down to the indifferent slave Haftlinge, all the grades of the mad hierarchy created by the Germans paradoxically fraternize in a uniform internal desolation<sup>272</sup>”.*

### **Buried humanity**

There are no human beings in Auschwitz. Not anymore. This is the hopeless conclusion of Primo Levi, near the end of his testimony<sup>273</sup>. In the introduction, I began my investigation by reflecting on how the Nazi doctor gazed at the Jewish prisoner, “that look *that* was not a look between two men”. That glance made me wonder how it could be possible to deny the humanity of a fellow human being. Throughout the thesis, I have tried to answer this question. In Chapter One, I defined dehumanisation and what it entails in the context of mass atrocities. Furthermore I argued that it constitutes a crucial stage in the genocidal process. In Chapter Two, I elaborated on the role of dehumanisation in the genocidal ideology, investigating how it contributes to disengaging the morality of the perpetrators. Consequently, in Chapter Three, I focused on dehumanisation at work by analysing the dehumanising features in the language, in

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272 Levi, 1959, p. 142 Haftlinge means prisoner in German.

273 Confirmed notably in the descriptions of several survivors, but also in the words of the soldiers who entered the camps, after the Nazi retreat. For instance, the testimonies in the documentary "Night will fall" describe the survivors as hopeless walking dead: they are skeletal, terrifying, barely describable as human beings. The soldiers say they had been "completely dehumanised".

visual symbolism and also in the physical treatment of victims. To conclude, in Chapter Four, I addressed the dehumanisation of perpetrators, arguing that the process also affects the victimisers themselves by depriving them of their personal agency and decreasing their empathetic involvement in humankind.

The analysis leads me to interpret the phenomenon as an absolute and inter-personal one which has an effect on all the parties involved. The humanity of victims has indeed been stripped away by perpetrators and hidden under the suffered violence. : dehumanised by the perpetrators, victims may feel that their humanity has been reduced due to their own maltreatment<sup>274</sup>. The self-dehumanisation of victims can be confirmed in the words of survivors. In the words of Elie Wiesel who survived Auschwitz, for instance: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me<sup>275</sup>”. However, by stripping the victims' humanity, the victimiser himself also loses the possibility to act as a moral being. He turns in a sort of automata, no longer able to make independent moral choices and detached from the community of men and women. To summarise, in the wake of atrocities, when the bloodshed has been carried out and the corps besiege the sight, there are no more human beings: neither those who survived nor the perpetrators.

### **Rebuilding on “dehumanised roots”?**

In the aftermath of gross human rights violations, transitional measures traditionally focus more on re-establishing the rule of law and reconstructing infrastructure. However, besides the physical destruction and institutional devastation of the country, interpersonal networks have also been devastated by the conflict: as dramatically summarised by a Croat man in Vukovar “Milosevic did not kill- our neighbours were killing<sup>276</sup>”.

In the wake of genocidal violence, people must once again learn to live together. According to Halpern and Weinstein, “reconstituting social networks is critical not only

<sup>274</sup>Smeulers & Grunfeld, 2011, p.207.

<sup>275</sup>Wiesel, 1982, p. 109.

<sup>276</sup>Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 561.



for a functioning society but also for the health and well-being of its people<sup>277</sup>” and it constitutes one of the greatest challenges for post-conflict societies. It is not an easy task as dehumanisation does not stop when the conflict ends. Moreover, it is simply impossible to pretend that it never occurred because the process influences also the post-conflict society: the inability to perceive former enemies as real people impedes reconciliation<sup>278</sup>, makes co-existence extremely fragile and results in the consequent risk of further conflicts. Almost twenty years after the end of the war, a Mostar resident said: “We are forced to live together...Because of that we are all pretending to be nice and to love each other. But it is known that I hate them and they hate me. It will be like that forever<sup>279</sup>”. For this reason, in overturned societies, reconstruction also has to deal with these “dehumanised” roots and overcome the hatred that pervades the relationship between former opposing groups. More specifically, I argue that the dehumanisation process must be reversed and recent enemies must be seen “in human terms<sup>280</sup>”. Rehumanisation is absolutely necessary to rebuild a society marked by interpersonal ruins<sup>281</sup>.

### **Some insights on rehumanisation**

The issue would require an in-depth investigation that cannot take place in the current thesis. However, I would like to give some insights. To rehumanise means to reverse the process of dehumanisation: it is about restoring the denied identity and community of the targeted group as well as of the perpetrators. Rehumanisation should thus address both the humanness, in other words the human qualities, and the factors that bond people to humankind.

In relation to humanness, to rehumanise a person means to recognise his identity, to

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277Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 562.

278 *Ibidem*.

279Quoted in Stover & Weinstein, 2004, p.1.

280Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 562.

281 *Ivi*, p. 563.

once more perceive the dehumanised subject “as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices and entitled to live his own life on the basis of his own goals and values<sup>282</sup>”. Since the “human” status is a complex condition to which many characteristics are attached, the rehabilitation of victims should deal with all those aspects of human life that have been targeted by dehumanisation process. The measures should thus address both symbolic and physical dehumanisation. Language played a crucial role in the dehumanisation process. Now, it has to be reversed in a “human” language, able to individualise beyond any demeaning categorisation, a language of responsibility where a man is called man and a carnage is not concealed under sanitised and euphemistic definitions. Moreover other symbols have a fundamental role in restoring the denied humanity. There could be plenty of examples but in relation to the Holocaust I can mention, for instance, the testimony of Major Leonard Barney in the documentary *Night will fall*:

*“It was amazing how quickly those poor people who were reduced almost at animal stage, how they come back to be human again. Girls, women who were really at terrible stage quite soon started to dress themselves up, clean themselves, get their hair done a little bit and get back to be normal humans again. It happened amazingly quickly, within two, three weeks I suppose. These people become human again. They had been completely dehumanised<sup>283</sup>”.*

Having satisfied the immediate needs like food, rest and heat, “women cried out for clothes. Clothes become a medical necessity<sup>284</sup>”, a powerful instrument in the process of rehumanisation. The rehumanisation of victims therefore should address their social status as well their professional lives, their civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural ones. On the other side, considering the perpetrators, I argued that they are affected by what Haslam defines mechanicist dehumanisation. For this reason, in their case, rehumanisation should mainly focus on restoring their denied agency:

<sup>282</sup>Kelman, 1973, p.48. Also Chapter I, paragraph 2.

<sup>283</sup>*Night Will Fall*, 2014, available on line at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_cwjbcmlh18284Ivi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cwjbcmlh18284Ivi).

dehumanised by violentization or by bureaucracy, in the aftermath of genocidal violence, the victimisers have to regain the ability to act as moral beings, make choices and accept their responsibilities. In this sense, I am persuaded that tribunals may have, under certain circumstances, a significant role in rehumanising perpetrators as they can contribute to restoring the moral responsibility for the crimes committed. To recognise one's identity means to individualize the others, not to perceive them anymore as an undifferentiated mass of inhumane creatures or sadistic monsters. It means to go beyond fixed roles and labels, recognising in both victims and perpetrators the complexity of human beings. Individualisation is a challenge to the major aspects of dehumanisation<sup>285</sup>.

Considering now the communal aspect of humanity, to rehumanise also means to recognise an individual “as part of an interconnected network of individuals<sup>286</sup>” who belong to the same humanity. Restoring the sense of community implies the reconstruction of emotional connectedness and human relations among groups. This “empathetic repair<sup>287</sup>” does not only refer merely to a moment of emotional resonance in which, for example, former enemies cry together. According to Halpern and Weinstein<sup>288</sup>, it goes far beyond that: it means to see the world from the complex perspective of another person, accepting that other people may hold a distinct perspective and different beliefs. Empathy is not the pursuit of an agreement on a definitive truth, but the effort to live together imagining a view of the world that one does not share. In order to restore these empathic bonds, interactions and encounters should occur, exploration and acknowledgement of the past and some level of openness or trust must develop<sup>289</sup>. Transitional justice mechanisms should be able to “create the ethical space for the emergence of the possibility for the empathetic sensibilities damaged by violence, both between individuals and within communities to be re-animated<sup>290</sup>”. However, the social effort is not sufficient: whereas dehumanisation is to a

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285Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 568.

286Kelman, 1973, p. 48. Also Chapter I, paragraph 2.

287Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008.

288Halpern & Weinstein, 2004.

289 *Ivi*, p. 564.

290Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, p. 338.

large extent a social process, rehumanisation, on the other hand, requires individual strong commitment to regain empathy for another<sup>291</sup>.

Rehumanisation thus means to restore the denied identity and community in the victims as well as in the perpetrators, targeting the symbolic as well as the physical level. As we tried to describe, the restoring of identity implies to recognise other's individuality whereas the restoring of community needs the rebuilding of "emotional connectedness<sup>292</sup>" through empathy. However the two aspects of humanity, the agentive and the communal one, were jointly stripped by dehumanisation. Now, in the rehumanisation phase, they are once again linked: empathy is fundamentally an individualising view of another<sup>293</sup>. While recognising the other as a fellow human being, empathy also enables to individualise him or her beyond any stereotype, thus challenging the major aspect of dehumanisation.

According to Bandura, "humanisation can rouse empathic sentiments and a strong sense of social obligation linked to evaluative self-sanctions that motivate human actions on other's behalf at sacrifice of one's self-interest or even at one's own peril<sup>294</sup>". It means that as much as dehumanisation weakens moral constraints against evil behaviours, an intense perception of others' humanity is capable of reinforcing our moral obligations even at the expense of our own interest and security. For this reason, I am deeply convinced that it is crucial to deal with the rehumanisation of both victims and perpetrators in the wake of genocidal violence and other mass atrocities. Together with the reconstruction of infrastructures and institutions, also social networks must be rebuilt: people have to regain their individuality and agency while recognising, at the same time, to be part of an interconnected community of human beings.

To conclude, I would like to refer to an episode reported by Gobodo-Madikizela. At the First International Psychoanalytic Conference held in Cape Town in 1998, during the debate following the psychoanalytical interpretation of the scholar's interview with the apartheid criminal de Kock, Albie Sachs, a judge on the South Africa's Constitutional

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291 Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 567 and p. 569.

292 *Ivi*, p. 568.

293 *Ivi*, p. 567.

294 Bandura, 2002, p. 112.

Court who for years defended people charged under racial and security laws under South African apartheid, raised his arm. An arm that had been damaged ten years earlier by a bomb intended to murder him. Gobodo- Madikizela describes the scene: “Sachs spoke about how important it was ' to see these men's humanity' and how much our hope in South Africans depended on reaching out to such glimpses of humanity in a spirit of compassion instead of revenge. Albie Sachs's words were all the more compelling because, as he spoke, he was gesturing with his cut-off arm”. The judge invokes humanity while gesturing with his wounded arm. This scene can well represent the great challenge for overturned societies in the aftermath of genocidal violence: victims as well as perpetrators must be able to regain their human identity and to once more recognise others' belonging to the community of human beings . Humanity should be restored in a spirit of compassion, moving beyond revenge.

In the Polish prison where he was detained after the end of the war, Rudolph Hoss, the aforementioned former commander of Auschwitz, admitted that he only came to know what humanity was among these Polish officials and guards, who in many cases were former prisoners in the Nazi death camps. Hoss wrote to his wife: “In spite of everything that happened they still treat me as a human being<sup>295</sup>”. Perhaps, the words of this perpetrator could be a source of hope: avoiding to dehumanise a fellow human being, even a fierce victimiser, we reject at the same time the possibility to exclude him from our moral obligations. This is the only way to put an end to the downward circle of dehumanisation and its abyss.

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295 Hoss' final letters to his wife and children, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1947 in Hoss, 1996.

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