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Flawed cosmopolitanisms of being human: mediation and worldmaking in media discourses of terrorism

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There is little to say about the Paris attacks that does not touch upon the phantom of the so-called War on Terror. What has been produced in journalistic and intellectual cycles certainly concurs on one thing: invisible violence of this sort challenges the tired cosmopolitan declaration of human togetherness, as it is based on de facto nihilistic actions of self-obliteration in the name of community values. There is much truth in Vijay Prashad's recent discussion of the ways especially Western leadership has espoused a [macho language about "pitiless war"](#) to reinforce its national and global role. Far from peace-making, this role obeys to a global gender order that fits nationalist-militarist discourse into a globalised civilising process, presenting social (gender) as cultural (East vs. West, North vs. South, developed vs. underdeveloped) hierarchies.

But it all functions at the level of metaphor to do the job of politics: men rule and those conforming to other gender or sexual conventions follow. How much does this reveal about the pillars of the present ideological work in leadership headquarters – and how are we to think about the agential basis of this 'civilising' language? What are the consequences of such discourse for the maintenance of our already frail cosmopolitan togetherness? I think it all boils down to an economy of violence. By this I do not refer to classical economics but to the reduction of supposed universal givens, such as the right to be recognised as a human being (as well as the responsibility to recognise others as humans and the intermittently stressed these days norms that regulate our rights and responsibilities in this type of recognition and self-recognition). The economy of violence after the France events is fixated upon measuring one's humanity against a stabilised (by Western civilisation) factor: the ability to circulate and enable circulations of habitus across markets, phantasmagoric industries and pleasure business.

I do recall here Steve Fuller's observation on the economic rationale of being human. He starts by distinguishing between the expressions 'Humanity comes at a price' and 'Humanity comes at a

cost'. He notes: ['The first phrase suggests what you need to pay your master to acquire freedom, while the second suggests what you need to suffer as you exercise your freedom'](). Though using this to reflect on the role of artificial intelligence in contemporary articulations of the human, his notes have far broader implications and implementations in the context of the Paris attacks. If anything, they suggest that masters do not go invisible in global events whereas the unfree have to suffer publically to be acknowledged and noticed by others. It is only then – and only when the slave achieves representation as sufferer, a dispossessed, 'acted upon' object – that they enter the visible fields of the media as human. Bombers and shooters remain invisible in this respect in an ever more mediatised world, in the sense that their motivations and actions do not obey to the economy of violence but inverse roles for a while, by humiliating masters on the global stage.

But first things first: if not carefully unpacked, the rationale of 'costing' and 'pricing' is in danger of mistaking a cultural recurrence in world societies for an economic activity divested of its utopian origins (reciprocal giving). At the same time, Fuller's elaboration on costing reproduces Prasad's argument that nihilist violence of the Paris type tends to mutate and spread like a virus to victimised societies at the level of leadership. If the ISIS terrorist perceives of himself – notably, rarely herself – as a victimised slave regaining self-respect through the ultimate heroic act (self-sacrifice), Western leadership feels that it has to reassert their master place on the world stage by discursive means. Such self-presentational games are characterised by an intersubjective perversion not that dissimilar to those explored by Hegelians such as Alexander Kojeve and, more recently, Axel Honneth. They also seem to obey to other processes involving the transvaluation of values within societal formations in which terrorist enclaves originate. But again, they speak of a dramaturgical platform on which roles, duties and resentments are discharged without questioning how their cosmological foundations are laid and how audiences come to accept and finance the 'play'.

It is here that the notion of 'the human' meets the cultural principles of markets proper, turning the economy of violence into the maiden of capitalism. Note that, as an extension of Fuller's essay, my understanding of 'markets' encompasses ideas of genealogical debts to civilisation and civility – two concepts irrevocably connected to Western and European histories of being human. Such debts refer to our responsibility to maintain and reproduce the pillars of our Western civilisation, which were laid on violence exercised upon racialized others to support ideals of compassion, belonging, equality and fraternity (paradoxically and perversely in the case of an ex-colonial power and current European and world player, France). If this sounds too

irrelevant to the Paris events at first, I invite readers to reconsider the power of markets – especially media markets - in producing particular world pictures and hence notions of humanity. While we all mourn the dead of Bataclan – note how a [pair of abandoned shoes outside the theatre signifies in Instagram the absence of humans in the violent site](#) - a dear Japanese friend posted on Facebook a shocking statistical chart from the Global Terrorism Index indicating that in 2013 about [80% of terrorist deaths took place in 2013 in 5 countries](#), none of which located in the Western hemisphere.

These statistics are more elusive in mainstream global media platforms, allowing (by omission) a message to dominate our fully network homes: the West has the only victims worthy of mourning in minute-long silences and annual commemorations; outside its imagined solidary terrain there are animals and beings that refuse to join the civilised world of humans. I do not wish to endorse violence of this or any other sort as a response to Western violence, only to highlight how the good old reciprocal cycle (of human recognition) now turns into an accelerating cycle of human self-destruction. Not only does the message reproduce the brutal bipolar logic of the World on Terror, it also promotes it to a [worldmaking monologue](#): an axiomatic picture about foreign realms of being (the lands and heritage domains from which terrorist come, as if there is no home-grown Western terror) managed by global media conglomerates that make, de-make or re-make whole populations, destinations and heritages that share little with the perpetrators of terrorist acts (save possibly nationality). Western worldmaking is not always evil in its intentions, but it tends to follow the economy of violence by default: we tend to forget that terrorism does not affect only Western European domains, where civilised mobilities of business, tourism and media flows happen, as if there is little to talk about outside them. Who would 'buy into' such unpopular calls anyway? And our world picture remains unchanged and unchallenged until the next bombing tailors a bit more the notion of human existence to our Western, European and civilised measures.