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## **Contemporary Western War and the Idea of Humanity<sup>1</sup>**

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*ABSTRACT: In the post-Cold War period Western military force has been deployed in the name of protecting humanity despite the obvious paradox of trying to achieve such protection through means that undermine this very aim. This had generated much debate about the merits of (humanitarian) intervention. This article does not aim to take a position in this debate, but rather examines its terms. It seeks to draw out what is assumed, implied and obscured by this debate. It explores the larger issue of how the framing in terms of protecting humanity works to exclude the apparent beneficiaries from the realm of politics and generates the demand for an urgent, violent resolution to what is produced as an ethical dilemma. The article starts by exploring the ways in which post-Cold War Western war has been represented as war for humanity. It then draws out how critical scholarship has brought into view that the apparently universal category is marked by hierarchy and thus undermines itself. The final section argues that the idea of humanity provides an ethical framing that both relies on and responds to the problematic association of politics with intelligibility, leaving us with a predicament that cannot be resolved.*

On 31 August 2010 US President Barack Obama (2010) declared the end of combat operations in Iraq. He spoke of the military forces involved in Operation Iraqi Freedom as having helped "Iraq seize the chance for a better future" and paid tribute to those who fought and lost their lives in Iraq: "They stared into the darkest of human creations -- war -- and helped the Iraqi people seek the light of peace". Obama acknowledged the war's enormous cost, but painted the future he claimed had been made possible in highly positive terms, seeking to establish its value to both the Iraqi and the American people. In doing so, Obama

(2010) located the war within a particular understanding of US history: “Throughout our history, America has been willing to bear the burden of promoting liberty and human dignity overseas, understanding its links to our own liberty and security”. However tendentious the claim that American history is about promoting liberty and human dignity overseas may be, the Good War in which the United States supposedly saved the world from the horrors of Nazism and brought freedom to oppressed peoples is a recognisable trope within public discourse; it is invoked time and again not least to explain and justify military operations. More broadly, no matter how much death, destruction and misery is reported to us in relation to current Western military operations, the claim that they are conducted for humanity - that they somehow serve to protect not only Western citizens but people at the receiving end - appears to remain possible.

The paradox of trying to achieve protection for humanity through means that undermine this very aim has attracted much attention, expressed not least in debates about humanitarian intervention, responsibility to protect and human security. My concern is not to evaluate yet again the merits of taking different positions in arguments over the use of force in general and humanitarian intervention in particular; nor is it to reveal the failure of Western war to live up to the proclaimed standard of humanity. Rather it is to explore how the terms of this debate produce a particular political landscape that continues to hang on the ethical value attributed to humanity.

In taking the way in which humanity is produced as central to contemporary Western war as my object of concern, I refer to categories that are problematic. First, and most obviously, humanity and the human are invoked in different ways in the context of war. Some supporters of war for humanity stress our sense of a common humanity, the way we recognise each other as human, while others are concerned with the protection of human rights. The latter seem to offer us a way to grasp what being human actually means inasmuch as one

could actually list human rights. Yet most often ‘humanity’ is not considered a category in need of explanation. This is illustrated by a recent book on the international law of war which, despite being called *Defending Humanity*, says nothing at all about humanity (Fletcher and Ohlin, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Thus, humanity not only needs no definition but self-evidently deserves protection. That, indeed, seems the point of invoking the term. While one could try to disentangle different definitions and their implications as they are used in the discourse of war, I am interested in what emerges through the interplay of multiple significations. Second, in identifying post-Cold *Western* war as my subject, I am asserting, at least implicitly, that such war might be identified as an object of analysis, and thus as differentiated from its outside. ‘The West’ is, of course, an outrageous over-generalisation. Yet ‘Western war’ is used unapologetically here;<sup>3</sup> the discourse produces ‘Western war’ as something identifiable, and while the West is differentiated within itself, the idea of war for the good of others is not only discursively attached to ‘the West’ but is articulated in defence of war across Western countries.<sup>4</sup>

In responding to claims about the humanity of Western war, one might try to destabilise them by examining what war “lives like, experiences like, tastes, feels, looks, and moves like” (Nordstrom, 2004). That is, perhaps the most screamingly obvious response to the discourse of Western war as one that promotes humanity is to confront it with the material, bloody consequences of such wars in the locations where they are fought. War lives differently across the globe; it affects people differently in different spaces (e.g. Gregory, 2004, 2010; Flint, 2005). My focus on the ostensibly a-geographical vision of universal humanity not only leaves out detailed consideration of its geographically differentiated effects but also obscures how (produced) spaces contribute to producing the “strategies and fantasies” that enable particular forms of political violence (Graham, 2010: XXVI). Yet in order to destabilise the ethical imperative that continues to override any serious acknowledgement of the

impossibility of war for humanity, it is also important to meet the discourse of humanity on its own terms, take it seriously – humour it, as it were – to show how it comes undone in itself, without the help of a ‘reality’ beyond it.

The article therefore starts out by exploring the ways in which post-Cold War Western war has been represented as war for humanity. It then examines the objection that the apparently universal category of humanity is marked by hierarchy and thus undermines itself. The third section explores further how the idea of humanity links violence and legitimacy and thereby serves to delimit what counts as politics. From this perspective the killing of civilians emerges as a symptom of the wider problem of the production of violence as (un)intelligible and, as a result, part of politics or outside it. The issue is then how the discourse situates Western war as a required response to what is produced as an urgent ethical demand around the notion of humanity, obscuring the politics of intelligibility. That is, the problem is the mirage of an extra-political ethics able to promote a better – that is, more human - world.

### ***War for Humanity***

The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 constitutes NATO as a defensive alliance. The crucial Article 5 declares that “an armed attack against one or more of [the member states] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” (NATO, 1949). Fifty years later NATO conducted airstrikes against Serbia, although no NATO country had been attacked. Instead, NATO declared that what it called the ‘crisis in Kosovo’ was a threat to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and therefore to NATO’s values. More specifically, the crisis was “the culmination of a deliberate policy of oppression, ethnic cleansing and violence pursued by the Belgrade regime under the direction of President Milosevic” (NATO, 1999). That NATO should respond militarily to threats to its values outside NATO territory did not sit easily with existing conceptions of the purpose of a defensive alliance and hence required justification.

Then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair was a vocal supporter of this intervention; he asserted that

Bismarck famously said the Balkans were not worth the bones of one Pomeranian Grenadier. Anyone who has seen the tear stained faces of the hundreds of thousands of refugees streaming across the border, heard their heart-rending tales of cruelty or contemplated the unknown fates of those left behind, knows that Bismarck was wrong (Blair, 1999).

Elsewhere in this speech Blair highlighted national interests as significant, but his case that the Kosovo intervention was ‘justified’ hangs on the asserted compassion for the fate of Kosovar Albanians. According to NATO (1999), “military actions [were] directed not at the Serb people but at the policies of the regime in Belgrade”. Put differently, this was not only a war *for* people – for the Kosovar Albanians - but also a war that was *not against* people; it was against something abstract, namely the policies of the Belgrade regime. What was at issue, it was claimed, was protecting people who were in danger of being killed or significantly maltreated by their own state.

This NATO operation was part, and for some the culmination, of a wider trend. Christopher Coker (2001: 2) called it “Europe’s first ‘humanitarian war’”. Adam Roberts (1993: 429) had earlier described ‘humanitarian war’ as an “oxymoron”, but nevertheless a potential reality; the use of significant force both by states and by the UN “in the name of humanitarianism” in northern Iraq, Somalia and the former Yugoslavia indicated a shift in international practice. That is, in the aftermath of the Cold War the West had taken to ‘invoking humanity’ (Zolo, 2002) when going to war. Rather than waging war explicitly and exclusively in defence of the national interest, Western countries and their alliances claimed to do so in the name of protecting human rights (Zolo, 2002: 3, Orford, 2003, Jabri, 2007: 94)<sup>5</sup>. This was and remains deeply controversial. In order to critique this rhetoric it is useful to first examine how it works.

The Kosovo intervention remains interesting because it was seen to break new ground as the first time “a group of states explicitly justified their use of force against another state on humanitarian grounds in a context where there was no explicit Security Council authorization” (Wheeler, 2000: 242, see also Douzinas, 2003: 171). That is, the operation was defended as legitimate (because humanitarian) despite being illegal (see Wheeler, 2000; Douzinas, 2007). There are a number of issues at stake in this argument. Most obviously, the operation was justified in explicitly ethical terms. This constitutes a move away from focusing on strategic reasoning. Although the defence of the national interest relies on a normative judgement in favour of states, asserting a normative basis for the West’s use of arguably illegal violence made ethics more obviously significant. Deploying ethics in this way became possible through the claim that humanity had to be protected, an aim that apparently transcends the concerns of individual communities.

This ethical framing leads to two immediate problems, arising from the issue that in war people get killed. One problem concerns whether the intervening state should put its soldiers into harm’s way in the pursuit of humanitarian aims, that is, to recall Blair’s rhetoric, whether the Balkans are worth the bones of a NATO soldier. The other and, given the humanitarian framing, more challenging problem arises from the inevitability of deaths within the population on whose behalf operations are conducted. Thus, the idea that Western warfare can promote human protection faces the problem that killing humans, in the name of (their) humanity or human rights seems paradoxical. In Dan Bulley’s words, the paradox is “that the responsibility to protect humans is always also a responsibility to attack them” (2010: 452).

This obvious paradox has, however, stopped neither this form of intervention nor the sort of argument that produces it. When military force is ostensibly used on behalf of humans, the fact that war kills does become a matter of central concern as “a humanitarian involvement must in the end involve some degree of responsibility for its supposed beneficiaries” (Roberts,

1993: 443, see also Wheeler, 2000: 139), but this is treated as merely a difficulty to be negotiated. Nicholas J. Wheeler (2000: 33-34) aims to do so by considering humanitarian outcomes: it is a matter of whether the supposed beneficiaries of the intervention are better off in the end. In such an assessment, the potential human cost of *non*-intervention – that people’s claims to safety and freedom from violence were already violated prior to the intervention – has to be compared to the human cost of intervention – the misery and deaths caused or enabled by the intervention itself. Wheeler (2000: 284) concedes that the Kosovo intervention “precipitated the very disaster it was aimed at averting”; yet he also suggests that the intervention eventually enabled a return to the rule of law. Thus, defenders of intervention wrestle with a complicated calculus of what promises better protection when people are threatened within or by their own states and countering this threat involves meting out death. Wheeler (2000: 284) candidly admits that the “difficulty with balancing these conflicting moral considerations is that it can never be known how many more Kosovars would have been killed and driven from their homes had NATO not acted in March 1999”.

Although it is therefore impossible to resolve the question, this line of thinking suggests that the case for such military operations is stronger the fewer non-combatants (are likely to) get hurt by or in the intervention itself. Counting the dead has thus become significant to academic analyses of warfare (Kahl, 2007), not least as part of the broader claim that Western military intervention is less bad than any feasible alternative because the West is able to protect non-combatants during warfare. Theo Farrell, for example, praises the West’s ability to “limit civilian deaths during combat” (2005: 179) and calls the Kosovo operation “NATO’s humane war” (2005: 156). Western war, then, is not just war *for* humanity; it is war carried out *with* humanity.

This is significant not just because the notion that the West is able to control the damage affects the calculus of death by painting the human cost of Western warfare as low, but

because the claim of humaneness seems to invest Western war with ‘humanity’ beyond its proposed aim. Western states now routinely claim that their military operations recognise the humanity of people in the states attacked. This concern is no longer just expressed in attempts to prevent harm to civilians and indeed unnecessary harm to enemy combatants. When Afghanistan was bombed in response to the September 11 events, ‘humanitarian’ supplies were dropped at the same time. David Rieff (2002: 240) observed then that it “was as if war had become impossible for a modern Western country to wage without describing it to some extent in humanitarian terms”. Similarly, we have been reassured time and again that the war in Iraq is not one against its people and that every effort is made to reduce the impact on civilians. Providing help to civilians and assisting post-war reconstruction has become an integral part of Western warfare, creating what Mark Duffield (2007: 27) calls “*a post-interventionary terrain of international occupation*”. Thus, the question of whether humanitarian war is possible or desirable seems increasingly difficult to even articulate; for the boundary between apparently altruistic and apparently self-interested motivations is simply no longer recognised when it is possible to claim that “[h]umanity is a strategic national interest.”<sup>6</sup> Western war is produced as humanitarian, whatever its purpose may be.

One may wonder whether this trend has not been reversed in the post-September 11 world as the fight against terrorism appears to have taken centre stage. The 1990s with its humanitarian-inspired interventionism and overblown rhetoric of humane warfare might appear to constitute only an interlude which, at this time of unabashed war-fighting by Western countries, is no more than a distant memory. Humanitarian aims seem to have made way for more pressing concerns. Yet Costas Douzinas (2003: 161) sees placing force “at the service of humanity” as a trend that “seems to be marking the new millennium”. This assessment is confirmed by others who have traced the continuity of the debate on humanitarian intervention (Bulley, 2010: 443) and argued that the war in Iraq “was fairly



consistent with the development of so-called ‘liberal’ or ‘humanitarian’ warfare during the 1990s” (Reid, 2006: 54). The continuity is palpable in politicians’ rhetoric. Blair’s 1999 Chicago speech cited above is in keeping with current discourse; it finished with his offer to the United States to work with them to “fashion [...] the design of a future built on peace and prosperity for all, which is the only dream that makes humanity worth preserving” (Blair, 1999). And Obama’s claim that the war in Iraq has served to promote human dignity draws on the same ideas that informed the 1990s discourse on humanitarian war. Viewed in this way, the war on terror does not signal a move away from war for humanity but rather constitutes its latest expression.

### ***Hierarchies of Humanity***

Coker’s work on ‘humane war’ illustrates the ambiguous role of the notion of humanity in making contemporary war. He claims that “[w]hat distinguishes warfare today is its purported ‘humanity’” (Coker, 2001: 2, see also 12); for Western societies are determined to minimise human suffering in war, on both sides. This is, Coker argues, related to a wider shift in strategies for justifying war in ethical terms. Humanism or humanitarian concerns have become so important because of the disappearance of metaphysics: “we have regrounded war on humanism, we have put humanity back at the centre of our philosophical and ethical systems of thought – hence the interest in humanitarian warfare, and the importance attached to ‘humanity’ in the wars we now fight” (Coker, 2001: 5). Prima facie, such humanising seems a positive development because the centrality of ‘humanity’ and ‘humaneness’ appears to impose restraint. Coker (2001: 5) accordingly notes that the move away from metaphysical justifications “is important because it removes any philosophical or moral defence of cruelty”. This seems persuasive: after all, one might burn people in the name of God, for example, but it seems difficult to justify doing so in the name of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

However, the restraint supposedly generated by the commitment to protecting humanity also makes war more acceptable. Coker (2001: 3) finds that Western societies “are intent on sanitising war”, making war without offence to liberal sensibilities possible. War’s perceived ability to protect humanity by force (and despite its use of force) thus enables the West to go to war in the first place. Hence, ideas of humanity may harm rather than protect those on whose behalf the West claims to fight. Coker (2001: 3) therefore notes that, unsurprisingly, “there are many who find the very concept of ‘humane warfare’ unconvincing, if not cynical or even meretricious”.

The cynicism lies not least in effectively putting such war beyond debate. “Who could be against humanity?”, Rieff (2002: 271) asks by way of pointing out the impossibility of such a position. Put differently, the assertion that war protects humanity construes the question of whether military force should be used as already answered. The obvious strategy for those who would critique contemporary Western war is therefore to prise apart the nexus of war and humanity. Hence, a significant line of critique has sought to show that the West fails in this protection, indeed does not properly recognise the humanity of those it claims to protect.

One line of argument responds to the calculus of death that authorises interventions by confronting the rhetoric with empirical evidence of killings. By focusing on civilian deaths as a result of recent Western military operations it is possible to claim, based on numerical difference, that non-Western lives simply do not count as much (Shaw, 2005: 115-123). That is, whereas the rhetoric asserts concern for people at the receiving end of Western military operations, their outcome suggests, on the contrary, a considerable level of disregard.

This empirical outcome is not seen as coincidental but rather as resulting from military practices. Discussions of the Kosovo operation are again instructive. Danilo Zolo (2002: 91) points out that “the ‘war from the sky’ placed [the] lives [of the citizens of the former

Yugoslavia] below those of Western soldiers”. There was, in other words, a “strict hierarchization of the value of life” (Douzinas, 2003: 174; 2007: 260). NATO’s decision to wage war exclusively from the air and particularly the altitude from which aircraft conducted operations became significant issues that are still cited as evidence that the operation was not humanitarian: the failure to deploy ground troops meant that those on whose behalf the war was apparently being fought were placed at more risk than NATO’s troops (Shaw, 2005: 22). Instructing pilots to fly at an altitude that put them out of range of defensive forces radically reduced their risk while, some argue, *increasing* the risk for people on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Martin Shaw (2005) sees this as a general trend in how the West fights its wars, something he calls risk-transfer war.

Such risk-transfer seems incompatible with the notion of protecting humanity. Asking how such practices remain possible despite concern amongst Western publics about deaths at the hands of their armed forces makes it possible to situate the issue in the wider political imaginary that enables them. Rieff draws our attention to how the disregard for non-Western people manifests itself in Westerners’ perceptions of significant international events and those affected by them. Westerners are perceived as individual persons but those in the non-West as an anonymous mass, as what he terms “human beings in the generic sense” (Rieff, 2002: 35). He contrasts “the story of *individuals* who died in the Twin Towers” to “another story – a humanitarian story – of undifferentiated victims in Afghanistan who were on the move, in grave danger, and needed to be helped” (Rieff, 2002: 6). This difference seems to be confirmed by cases where a very few deaths of Western military personnel – such as in Somalia and Rwanda - led to the abandonment of the mission (Shaw, 2005: 80) while civilian deaths in much greater numbers have not had the same impact.

The failure to recognise people in their singularity also forms part of a critique that has been formulated evocatively by Judith Butler. In her *Precarious Life* she examines how

Western lives and non-Western lives have been valued differently in the ‘war on terror’. The key question she asks is: “Who counts as human?” (Butler, 2004: 20). That is, instead of assuming that we operate on the basis of a common humanity, Butler proposes to grasp the differential valuation of life by asking who, in this discourse, actually counts as human. She approaches this question by considering “[w]hat *makes for a grievable life*” (Butler, 2004: 20) since grievability “makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living” (Butler, 2009: 15). Butler challenges what she identifies as the hierarchy of grief, whereby the loss of US lives leads to ‘humanising’ in the form of obituaries whereas Afghan and Arab lives are not accorded the same status.<sup>9</sup>

It is significant to be clear what is at stake. Butler is concerned that while we believe that we recognise the humanity of all, the opposite is the case. Conceptualising current politics through the idea of a common humanity hence obscures that lives are valued differently. As she puts it,

when we take our moral horror [in the face of violence] to be a sign of our humanity, we fail to note that the humanity in question is, in fact, implicitly divided between those for whom we feel urgent and unreasoned concern and those whose lives and deaths simply do not touch us, or do not appear as lives at all (Butler, 2009: 50).

Thus, despite the rhetoric of humanity and our perception of ourselves as committed to a non-exclusionary conception of humanity, our discourse produces those in the non-West as not quite human and thereby makes Western violence unreal. The issue is not that we fail to acknowledge certain humans or to grieve them, but rather that they are not grievable, that it is impossible to acknowledge them. Butler cautions against any trivial claim that the discourse she analyses makes perpetrating physical violence against those construed as not quite human inevitable (Butler, 2004: 36). Yet the incomplete recognition of non-Western others as human enables violence against them by representing it as unlike violence against humans, in other words, as not quite violence.

That our notion of humanity obscures the actual division of humans into categories that significantly affect their ability to successfully claim protection, thereby signalling a hierarchy within the ostensibly non-discriminatory master-category of humanity, is not of course a new argument. Diametrically opposed to the liberal faith in the West's ability to protect humanity, militarily or otherwise, is the argument, similarly familiar, that the idea of humanity has always been marred by how the classification at its heart undermines its supposed aim. So while the ideal of humanity should work against exclusion, invoking humanity has actually been central to foreign domination and exclusion from defining one's own political destiny. Historically, the liberal endorsement of universal humanity did not overcome the differentiation of the living into those worth involving and protecting as humans and those not entitled to such preferential treatment. Liberalism was rather associated with the possibility of empire (Mehta 1999). The idea of humanity is central to this because, as Leela Gandhi (1998: 29) highlights, the "humanist valorisation of man is almost always accompanied by a barely discernible corollary which suggests that some human beings are more human than others – either on account of their access to superior learning, or on account of their cognitive faculties". This problem necessarily remains. Thus Vivienne Jabri argues that the war in Iraq "enables colonisation in the name of humanity" (2007: 30) and Derek Gregory (2004) analyses the 'war on terror' as part of a 'colonial present'. Rieff similarly observes that "contemporary advocates of state humanitarianism" subscribe to ideas that are not dissimilar to those of imperialists (2002: 61) and Duffield (2007: 197) suggests that liberalism remains unable to question imperial rule. Critical thinking about contemporary global politics thus understands liberalism as re-enacting rather than overcoming the colonial relation, as the problem rather than the solution.

While this has become a widespread argument in response to the 'war on terror', Anne Orford (2003: 34) already highlighted this issue when she warned that intervention stories in

the 1990s “ignore a history in which imperial powers announced and celebrated their superiority in similar language, with tragic consequences”. Orford’s work is of particular interest because she highlights the ethical framing. She shows how the idea of humanitarian intervention served to invest the use of military force with a problematic new respectability (Orford, 2003: 4); for the narrative of this new interventionism represented military intervention not only as “justifiable but morally required to rescue the victims of ethnic cleansing, attempted genocide, religious fundamentalism and massive human rights violations” (Orford, 2003: 34). Crucially, it was the inhumanity of the treatment people recognised as (potentially) human received at the hands of others that had to trigger military intervention on behalf of their humanity. Blair’s passionate endorsement of the Kosovo intervention was bound up with the spectre of the Holocaust; in his view, the issue is that “[a]wful crimes that we never thought we would see again have reappeared - ethnic cleansing, systematic rape, mass murder” (1999). Memories of the Holocaust, not least the depiction of camps as ‘Belsen 1992’, also played a significant, if controversial, role in legitimising the intervention in the Bosnian war (Campbell, 2002a, 2002b). Obama (2010), finally, reminds us that Western troops fighting in Iraq “defeated a regime that had terrorized its people.” Thus, Western intervention is construed as responding to oppression and crimes against humanity that recall the atrocities of the Third Reich, and hence the emotional appeal of the idea of saving people in the name of humanity is powerful. Yet while ideas of humanity may suggest protection, they also authorise the discrimination against and maltreatment of humans not recognised as properly human. The Holocaust was not least enabled by construing certain categories of people as outside humanity. More generally, politically deploying the category of the human inevitably implies a differentiation between people properly classified as human and those falling short of the requirements for inclusion.

War for humanity is always war against inhumanity. There are two aspects to this issue that are interrelated but that should be disentangled for the purpose of analysis. The inhumanity conceptually opposed to the humanity of the West is that of those committing the crimes against humanity; it is to this inhumanity that the West's use of force is seen to respond. The problem is then that this inhumanity of the perpetrator authorises the use of force which is, however, inevitably a use of force against the victim:<sup>10</sup> much as politicians wish to assert that operations are not against the people of the target country, it is not actually possible to bomb a policy or indeed a regime. This creates the curious situation whereby those who are to be protected – the oppressed and maltreated civilians whose situation is to be improved - are attacked and some are indeed killed. Within the discourse of war for humanity it seems possible to *conceptually* draw the line between human and inhuman; the problem is appropriately acting on the distinction because perpetrator and victim share a space, meaning that bombs intended for the former may well kill the latter. If this was the only issue, then targeting the use of military force more precisely would ameliorate the situation, which is why a restrained use of violence by ground forces is also construed as more appropriate to this kind of war than aerial warfare (Kaldor, 2007: Ch. 6; Wheeler, 2000, Ch. 8; but see Zehfuss, 2011).

Yet since defenders of war for humanity propose to operate on a universal notion of humanity, the categorisation of perpetrators as inhuman already undermines the concept. More disturbingly, even the proposed beneficiaries of intervention are produced as less than human. 'War for humanity' reflects a well-intentioned desire to provide the opportunity to claim humanity to those less fortunate than ourselves; it is meant to deliver humanity to others who must therefore in some sense lack it in the first place. A different way of putting this is to say that intervention becomes necessary due to people's failure to successfully claim their human rights and therefore their failure to be produced as fully human (see Douzinas, 2007:

45). This is illustrated by Wheeler's observation that the "narrative of common humanity is sufficiently deeply rooted in Western societies for the victims of gross human rights abuses to be seen as deserving concern and charity" (2000: 308). In this scheme, people in countries the West intervenes in are recipients of 'charity'; they do not shape the situation.

As Orford notes, the result of the picture of the world that is painted in what she calls new intervention stories is that there is no "sense of the agency of the peoples of the states where intervention is to be conducted" (2003: 170). She draws our attention to how, in contrast, the picture of the West relies on images of agency. There is therefore a significant gap between those in need of the gift of humanity and those who are already in possession of humanity. The beneficiaries of humanitarian war are produced as not quite human. Inasmuch as the recipients' incomplete humanity is rooted in their insufficient agency, delivering human rights as charity cannot remedy the situation; instead it reinforces it. In this scheme, the other is objectified as a passive recipient of the gift of the conditions under which humanity becomes possible, unable to make a contribution to visions of the future.

Thus, non-Western contributions to the question of how we might live together are disallowed. Humanity is not something all people possess, but has become something the West may offer. Whereas Western humanity involves defining what counts as such, non-Western humanity does not. Hence, the core of the problem is not that people get killed. While the way in which the calculus of interventionists allows for individual humans to be sacrificed in the name of saving other humans has created much passionate debate, the focus on deaths obscures a larger issue, namely how the very term apparently deployed to protect people effects the exclusion that makes their deaths acceptable.

### ***Strangers, Humans, Barbarians and the Good War***

'Saving strangers' continues to appear urgent, however, even if we appreciate the conceptual problem. The starving and the oppressed, beamed into our living rooms and onto our



smartphones, still demand a response. Wheeler (2000: 310 and passim) argues that saving strangers is at times morally required; for him the issue is one of stopping violence against others, of determining what offers the best opportunity to save them. This is also the apparent logic playing out in Blair's and Obama's justifications of the use of force in what seems to be quite different contexts. This endorsement of violence comes as part and parcel of the claim, in one way or another, that humanity needs to be protected from violence and hence what Helen Dexter (2007: 1069) refers to as the "Good War revival" requires argumentative work. The ethics of the matter is crucial to the predicament as well as to its apparent resolution.

The asserted moral value of war owes much to the idea that global politics is marked by what some, following Mary Kaldor, still call the 'new wars' (Kaldor, 1999; Münkler, 2004).<sup>11</sup> Crucially, the argumentative paradox that continues to produce the intervention debate is clearly visible in Kaldor's more recent work, where she argues that we need to "find ways to minimize violence at a global level" (2007: 152) and advocates thinking in terms of human security. She acknowledges that war requires valuing some lives less than others and asserts more broadly that we all operate on one or other "hierarchy of lives" (Kaldor, 2007: 169-170). While human security requires more than the absence of physical violence, that absence is necessary. Yet where life is "directly under threat from other parties" Kaldor argues for "the effective use of force and a much more robust interventionist policy" (2007: 186). Thus, in pursuit of the aim of reducing global violence Kaldor endorses 'the effective use of force', despite her awareness that doing so necessitates and violently implements a hierarchisation of lives. Like Wheeler, she advocates the use of violence to reduce violence, and her sensitivity to the conceptual contradiction does not stop her.

In this argument the two implications of producing Western war as promoting humanity work in sync again. Western violence appears as somehow not as violent as non-Western violence; it is thus an appropriate tool for the reduction of violence. Whereas on the surface

the issue appears to be produced around an opposition between violent other – the other that is guilty of genocide, ethnic cleansing and more recently terrorism - and peaceful self, the issue is more complex; for the self's capacity for violence is not denied, is in fact endorsed as remedy. This is possible in part because Western violence is construed as a lesser violence – a violence that is said to lead to fewer deaths, an anti-violent violence. This representation and its implication that such violence is in tune with the requirements of ethics owes something to the influential interpretation of the impact of the availability of high-tech weaponry (Zehfuss, 2011) that is, for example, reflected in Farrell's assertion that precision bombing is humane (2005: 161), as though the use of highly destructive weapons can somehow involve care and concern for those at the receiving end. While current counterinsurgency operations have to an extent challenged the significance of the West's technological superiority, the strategies for legitimising Western violence have remained much the same. Counterinsurgency is 'population-centric' and hence the effect of warfare on people cannot easily be obscured. Western militaries have rather embraced the idea of war for the people more thoroughly. The violence is not only downplayed - counterinsurgency has been portrayed as "armed social work" (Kilcullen, 2006: 138) - but construed as in tune with respecting humanity. Efforts by Western militaries to take account of the culture of the host nation's population can be seen as part and parcel of the effort to produce war as compatible with the notion of universal humanity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while Western war may have changed from the 1991 Gulf War as a performance of the implications of the much-hailed Revolution in Military Affairs (RAM) to the current more 'people-centric' counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq,<sup>13</sup> it has been produced as for humanity across these changes.

The pretence that Western war may recognise those at the receiving end as human is an integral part of the liberal illusion. My argument owes much to existing work that shows why

liberalism may more profitably be seen not as a peaceful vision appropriate for reducing war, but as producing war in the first place.<sup>14</sup> My concern, however, is less the question of biopolitical governance and more how claims to ethics have become a “well-concealed political violence” (Derrida, 2002: 307). Hence it seems vital to me to pay explicit attention to how defenders of intervention endorse violence not just as politically necessary or even strategically required, but as good. The relegitimation of Western war invokes a “powerful moral order” (Dexter, 2007: 1069). Whatever shift may have occurred between the 1990s with their focus on humanitarian disasters, on the one hand, and the post-2001 world apparently concerned primarily with terrorism, on the other, the claims assigning Western war a crucial role in the moral universe have not substantially changed. Indeed, James Der Derian (2009: xx) claims that the events of September 11 were used “to radically up the ante, making *virtuous war* the only game worth playing”.

Der Derian (2009) traces the interplay of technical and ethical superiority. Indeed, we might not find ourselves in this debate were it not for the considerable advances in high-technology weaponry and more broadly the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (Gregory, 2010). Yet while the West’s asserted ability to fight humanely, bolstered not least by its ‘smart’ weapons, may be an enabling condition, it is not sufficient of itself. That is, Western violence is not permissible or required because it causes fewer deaths, but rather because an ethical imperative is seen to underwrite it. Put differently, at the heart of this argument lies an ethical decision, a moral judgement, that is simultaneously highlighted and obscured by the claim of war for humanity. It is highlighted because humanity absolutely requires the use of force as a matter of morality – the tear-stained faces of the refugees demand it – and obscures it – one cannot, as Rieff suggests, be against humanity and hence no actual judgement seems to be involved.

This simultaneous highlighting and hiding of the decision plays out interestingly in Jean Bethke Elshtain's polemical defence of the 'war on terror' in her *Just War against Terror*, the subtitle of which - *The Burden of American Power* - seems to invoke the concept of the 'white man's burden'. Elshtain starts by talking about Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* in which the 'humanists' deny the existence of rats in the city of Oran because they cannot exist. Elshtain claims that they are "unwilling or unable to peer into the heart of darkness" (2003: 1); they cannot acknowledge the enormity of the threat to their lives. Elshtain (2003: 2) then enlists Hannah Arendt's line that "politics is not the nursery" not just to ridicule the 'humanist' position but to declare it dangerous: such naiveté, she argues, "can get thousands of innocents killed". At the heart of Elshtain's forceful defence of the 'war on terror' is the production of the distinction between terrorism and "what we call 'normal' or 'legitimate' war" (Elshtain, 2003: 20). This distinction is central for her: it is vital to observe it. Terrorists are, Elshtain (2003: 19) tells us, not interested in "the subtleties of diplomacy or in compromise solutions"; they "have taken leave of politics".

Thus, Elshtain's terrorists do not form part of the community of humans with whom a political solution to disagreements might be possible. This is why those who Elshtain refers to as the 'humanists' get it so dreadfully wrong: you cannot be reasonable in dealings with terrorists, much as one could not negotiate with the plague. This logic has also been evident in political discourse, not least in the once widespread 'no negotiations with terrorists'-stance among Western governments that is, intriguingly, increasingly being modified or indeed abandoned. In Elshtain's polemic terrorists are equivalent to the rats of Camus's Oran: they are not human. What is interesting is that they are not human because they fail to participate in politics as Elshtain understands it – they do not negotiate. At the same time Elshtain (2003: 22) urges us to actively exclude them from politics because their "extremism" means that we cannot negotiate with them. It is hence unclear whether they do not negotiate with us or vice

versa, but in either case what is important to Elshtain is that ‘the terrorists’ are not part of politics.

‘The terrorists’ do not have aims or demands that Elshtain is able to understand as political. That is, the difference between the West and ‘the terrorists’ is not about the use of violence but about the intelligibility of that use. The West’s use of violence is instrumental and at its best, in Kaldor’s words, “effective” (2007: 186). It achieves something and may be explained in those terms. In contrast, the terrorists’ use is unrestrained, life-denying and impossible to understand or even articulate within a conception of politics that revolves around negotiating solutions. Put differently, only those who play by the rules Elshtain identifies engage in what she recognises as politics (which has already been defined as the most human of activities). It is then impossible to be human and disagree with her conception of politics, and in particular to be human and endorse violence of the kind that she has already defined as anti-political.

This demarcation of politics is at the heart of the disconnect between the Western liberal belief that ideas of universal humanity may provide the cornerstone for a peaceful politics within which everyone may be safe to have their say and the view that contributing to an already existing politics cannot enable emancipation or freedom. Those who have been excluded and continue to be excluded from what politics is in the first place cannot find equality – or indeed humanity – in fitting in with that politics. Yet this is not visible from the liberal position. Thus, the paradox is not so much that a limited form of violence is temporarily endorsed in the pursuit of a non-violent world, but that the putatively universal and unconditional idea of humanity works to exclude and impose conditions. As Jacques Derrida (2006: 111) points out, “If you ask the Other one to be human before you open your door, then that is a condition”. In Elshtain’s reasoning the door is firmly closed to those who do not meet her test of proper political behaviour. It is therefore not necessary to engage with

others' political imaginary; it is also crucially impossible. These others are outside the *logos*, beyond our understanding, unintelligible. Their use of violence puts them beyond politics because it may not be made intelligible within the pre-given understanding of politics. They are hence casually excluded from participation in what is recognised as politics.

The terrorists' being outside of politics then necessitates both the violent response and its defence in terms of ethics: just war, as far as Elshtain is concerned. The issue of violent response has been elucidated by critical analyses of contemporary global politics that take liberalism as the problem. Liberalism deconstructs around its vision of the human that requires it to construe the human as free and yet at the same time circumscribes what this freedom may entail. In their analysis of the liberal way of war, Michael Dillon and Julian Reid identify precisely the differential valuation of lives as a central feature of liberalism, as inherent to its logic. Liberalism's apparently benign promotion of life means that "the liberal way of rule must continuously sort life into categories of living beings which contribute to or detract from the promotion of life" (Dillon and Reid, 2009: 87). This is clearly what Elshtain is doing. Dillon and Reid conclude that liberalism cannot offer a critique, a better way for global politics based on its vision of non-exclusionary humanity, because liberalism produces this division into life to be protected versus life threatening life in the first place. It produces the problem it purports to solve. While liberal modernity is associated with ideas of peace, it is also marked by wars and, more significantly, by "a gradual increase in military capacities among liberal societies for the violent destruction of human life" (Reid, 2006: 2).

Liberal violence is permissible and even required; the key to this is its intelligibility in terms of promoting freedom, the good. Douzinas describes colonialism and the human rights movement as forming "a continuum, episodes in the same drama", which he describes as "bringing civilisation to the barbarians" (2007: 83). The civilisation of the barbarian becomes invisible in this project. Douzinas sees the problem in the Christian version of the civilising

mission that legitimated extermination in the pursuit of salvation, a problem that he sees as having been transferred to modern humanitarianism. He suggests that for the “Greeks, who introduced a distinction between us and the others, the barbarians were simply foreigners, people who spoke gibberish (bar-bar), an incomprehensible language” (Douzinas, 2007: 172).

While I am unsure about the historical accuracy of what he seems to imply – that the Greeks had a more benign attitude towards the other (see Kristeva, 1991: 51-56) – the issue of the other’s unintelligibility seems significant. Whereas the other and their violence lie beyond comprehension, Wheeler, Kaldor and Elshtain all make the violence of Western states intelligible. Its intelligibility confers legitimacy. Strikingly, despite all the agonising about the adverse effects on the ‘supposed beneficiaries’ in these arguments the West appears to *know* the way forward. That is, the question that is ostensibly posed is construed as already answered: one cannot be against humanity or indeed negotiate with the plague. The right way forward is certain. The appeal of saving strangers, of resisting a repetition of the horrific crimes that are so often summarily evoked under the heading of the Holocaust, propels the argument over the point where a decision might actually be considered. The ethical imperative triggered by invoking humanity prevents acknowledgement of the complexity of the political situations calling, apparently, for a response.

Yet Wheeler admits at one point that the very thing that for him makes all the difference in assessing whether or not an operation is humanitarian (and therefore legitimate) cannot be known. It is impossible to know whether or not Kosovar Albanians were better off due to the intervention because we cannot know what would actually have happened had NATO not intervened. Thus, the right way forward cannot be *known*, is revealed as involving a decision, indeed as undecidable, as unintelligible in the terms that Wheeler proposes. Hence, this violence cannot claim for itself the intelligibility that confers legitimacy. It is, in the terms of its defenders, outside the politics that it is construed to promote.

Thus, it is not just the other and their violence that is unintelligible. One's own actions are, too, not least inasmuch as they address a future that is not accessible to knowledge. What is more, we are unintelligible even to ourselves. Here Butler's work becomes interesting again; for she elucidates our own inability to 'give an account of ourselves' (2005). For Butler (2005: 55), "to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish this limit not only as a condition for the subject, but as the predicament of the human community itself". This is significant because the other's unintelligibility is produced as a threat not least against the foil of our supposed transparency. Our self-image as peaceful relies on our own intelligibility. We use violence only inasmuch as reason permits or even demands it. Butler fundamentally questions this framing. It is not just the other who is beyond our grasp: we are barbarians to ourselves.<sup>15</sup> Hence, we cannot escape living with barbarians. From this point of view, trying to bring humanity to the barbarians is impossible not due to our inability to effectively implement such an aim, or even due to the faultiness of the vision of humanity, but because all humans are beyond full comprehension and thus inevitably bear the hallmarks of the barbarian. The problem lies with construing an (apparently extra-political) ethical imperative to violently resolve the uncomfortable unintelligibility and promote a more human world.

### ***Conclusion***

Contemporary Western war has been construed as war for humanity, promoting freedom and dignity. In his critique of the West's tendency to invoke humanity when going to war, Zolo (2002) uses Carl Schmitt's observation in *The Concept of the Political* that "whoever invokes humanity is trying to cheat" as the epigraph.<sup>16</sup> Put differently, the claim of a war in the name of humanity is, in Zolo's view, a dangerous deception. Humanitarianism merely provides a rhetorical cover for the pursuit of interests, and in Zolo's thinking these may be crudely distinguished. What is far more significant, however, is that the discourse of humanity entails a paradox as it necessarily undermines what it ostensibly asserts.



The division of our thinking with respect to living beings into the human and the non-human or animal is problematic. There is already conditionality in the requirement for the other to be human for certain responses to become possible (see Derrida, 2006: 111). Thus we may wish to seek ways to overcome thinking in terms of humanity altogether. Yet the line drawn between the human and the non-human remains a powerful feature of contemporary political thought (Derrida, 2008) and the question of how to respond to the suffering human continues to be produced as a crucial political question.

Humanity, of course, may be invoked to support war in its name or to reject any use of force. After all, a failure to use violence, for example in respect of the crisis in Darfur, can also be construed as representing an insufficient recognition of non-Western others. Put differently, even if sincere, the commitment to protecting humanity does not provide a response to the problem it identifies. What is worrying is the way in which it obscures the ethico-political predicament. By claiming a necessary and urgent course of action based on a category that is thought to exist independently of any concrete conflict at hand, working out the contradictory demands involved in a situation and their implications becomes apparently unnecessary. The suffering of the other – the ‘tear stained faces’, in Blair’s pathos-laden register – urgently demands a response.

Butler suggests that to be human means “to be in a predicament that one cannot solve” (2005: 60). War for humanity presents a false and violent resolution to this predicament. More broadly, the politics of humanity is a politics of delimiting what sort of disagreement is permissible, a politics of getting rid of politics. This move becomes impossible if we instead acknowledge that we are all barbarians – in the sense of being beyond comprehension - who happen to share a planet without, however, sharing a vision of living together. More importantly, the ethical imperative to ‘fix’ others’ unintelligibility by violently implementing the right way forward disappears.

Of course, this does not offer an attractively clear alternative response to the suffering other. Some think we need to altogether reject the idea of humanity. Yet ultimately, it is not that ‘humanity’ is bad rather than good, but rather that “simply that we are not sure of what humanity means” (Derrida, 2006: 112). Of course, being unsure is not enjoyable, and it does not typically generate the sort of passion that saving strangers or embracing humanity might. Yet grand claims and passions feed rather than resolve our predicament. Indeed, it is the irresolvability of the predicament that suggests that there is hope of resisting the illusion that continues to turn an apparently all-encompassing vision of humanity into an urgent demand for particular, and violent, courses of action.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Humanity’ does not even appear in the index; it is mentioned once in the context of the idea that belonging to “the great community of humanity” is what is behind the legitimacy of defending others and again in relation to the claim that the value of national culture is “intrinsic” (Fletcher and Ohlin, 2008: 80 and 216).

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<sup>3</sup> Other critical scholars have preferred ‘liberal war’ which avoids the problem of the West by replacing a widely used term by one that is ostensibly more correct. I do not follow this practice or Gregory’s choice of ‘Northern’ war (2010) because the discourse I examine associates such war with the West, whatever that may be. I am moreover not persuaded that such terminological dissociation from the West is any less problematic than referring to the category. Whatever the conceptual and geographical issues, countries commonly identified as Western dominate this form of war.

<sup>4</sup> Germany is often the odd one out in military matters, but the trope of taking responsibility for others through war is crucial even to German discourse. See Zehfuss, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Zolo constantly uses ‘Western’ and ‘the West’. Orford (2003: 33) identifies the significance of “images of the West”. Jabri (2007, esp. Ch. 1) uses ‘liberal’ war but points out the links to ideas about the West.

<sup>6</sup> Shashi Tharoor, who became acting head of the UN Department of Public Information in 2000, quoted in Rieff, 2002: 270.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, one can do much in defence of principles. Douzinas reminds us that defending human rights is not the same as defending humans. In his view, “Iraq has shown that human rights may be paramount but the humans are not” (Douzinas, 2007: 33).

<sup>8</sup> For a challenge to this argument see Kaempf (2006: 305).

<sup>9</sup> While this is important, the issue is more complicated than she allows. See Zehfuss, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> I leave to one side whether victims and perpetrators may be separated in this way. See Zehfuss, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> My analysis fails to heed Gregory’s exhortation that it is a mistake to analyse contemporary war without reference to the ‘new wars’ (Gregory, 2010: 169); for an excellent critique of the ‘new wars’ thesis that also implicitly challenges Gregory’s apparent acceptance of a particular reading of the RMA and its relation to contemporary Northern war, see Dexter, 2007 and 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Of these efforts the US Human Terrain System has attracted most controversy. See Network of Concerned Anthropologists, 2009; Kelly et al. 2010.

<sup>13</sup> For the argument that the changes have been less pronounced than it appears see Ucko (2009).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Butler, 2009; Dillon and Reid, 2009; Duffield, 2007; Gregory, 2004; Jabri, 2007; Reid 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva’s (1991) observation that we are “strangers to ourselves” goes in a similar direction.

<sup>16</sup> As Louiza Odysseos reminded me, Schmitt’s claim is more complicated and interesting than Zolo allows.