

INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS DEHUMANIZATION A POLITICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO THE TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT: The denial of humanity about women victims of trafficking, in Europe as well as in other countries questions the crisis of Western democracies and spreads violent codes, degradation, and weakening of human rights.

This work explores the connection between philosophy and life (Cavarero 1999) and analyses how this erodes the human substratum of Western countries through the conditioning of biopower, logic of visual hypercontrol and commodification of relational capacity.

From various philosophical-political and anthropological perspectives, an extremely worrying picture seems to emerge unexpectedly for the conservation of the root of mankind, and how this appears to be undermined by democratic societies. In a context of inclusion-exclusion dynamics, a significant reduction in freedom is reported and apparently exist not only for trafficked women.

Paradoxically, gender discrimination only seems to enhance the gravity of the ongoing process of “nientification”.

This revolves around indifference or the inability to react in the face of a portion of humanity deprived of all subjectivity, where humans are transformed into socially dead beings (Butler 2019).

La negazione di umanità delle donne vittime di tratta, in Europa come in altri paesi, interroga la crisi delle democrazie occidentali e diffonde codici violenti, degrado, affievolimento dei diritti umani. Questo lavoro parte dal nesso tra filosofia e vita (Cavarero 1999), si interroga sulle ragioni che erodono il sostrato umano dell'Occidente attraverso i condizionamenti del biopotere, logiche di iper-controllo visivo e mercificazione della capacità relazionale.

Da diverse prospettive filosofico-politiche e antropologiche, emerge inaspettato un quadro estremamente preoccupante per la conservazione della radice del genere umano, minata dalle stesse società democratiche. In un contesto di dinamiche di inclusione ed esclusione si evidenzia una riduzione significativa di libertà non solo per le donne trafficate, ma a partire da esse. Paradossalmente, la discriminazione

di genere potenzia soltanto la gravità del processo di “nientificazione” in atto. Esso ruota intorno all’indifferenza o incapacità di reazione dei più, cittadini-spettatori dinanzi a una porzione di umanità privata di ogni soggettualità, trasformata in esseri umani già socialmente morti o non degni di lutto (Butler 2019).

KEYWORDS: Nexus in modern political life, Indifference to dehumanization, Trafficking of women, Contemporary democracy

PAROLE CHIAVE: Nesso politica vita, Indifferenza alla disumanizzazione, Donne merce, Nientificazione, Democrazia contemporanea

1. Introduction

Indifference to dehumanisation is one of the most serious symptoms of the contemporary anthropological crisis in democracy. This article recognises the connection between philosophy and life according to Cavarero (1998) and investigates factors that erode the human substratum of the West, which is conditioned by biopower, the logic of visual hypercontrol and the commodification of relational capacity, causing indifference and homogenisation. From a philosophical-political point of view, the paper highlights how the denial of humanity in female victims of human trafficking poses serious questions about the West, while spreading codes of violence, degradation, and a weakening of human rights⁽¹⁾.

The metaphor of blindness is taken from a famous novel⁽²⁾ and is used here as a frame for the inability of seeing the degree of dehumanization that is affirmed towards different categories of people such as migrants, the homeless, and trafficked women. The text focuses only on the condition of the latter, as a serious indicator of the ongoing debacle, characterised by Cavarero as a dimension of “horror-ism” (2017), a homologation or as mass indistinction. Concerns are raised about the re-enactment of crimes against the human race.

(1) For a sociological analysis of the phenomenon, please refer to a specialized bibliography, such as Aa.Vv., *Women Seriously Exploited*, 2022 Report, Slaves No More, Rome; A. Akinyoade *et al.* 2021.

(2) J. Saramago, *Blindness*, Feltrinelli, Lisbon 1995 — Milan 2000–2018.

2. Blindness: an interior disease?

Saramago (1995) describes blindness as an infectious disease with a strong capacity for contagion, capable of threatening institutions and plunging humanity into barbarism, erasing solidarity and compassion, with an assonance of the *Hoelle-Wut* feared by Roth and Nicoletti (1934; 2000).

Saramago details a disease “from within” that spares no one, not even the medics in charge of treatment. This raises concerns about the crisis of the anthropological substratum of contemporary democracy, which seems to suffer from a strange incapacity towards its own conspecific with such indifference to dehumanization.

The gravity of the issue is not restricted to a single area of social life and requires a considered reflection about the denial of humanity experienced by women who are trafficked for sexual purposes. In Italy, as in Europe and in many other countries connected by a criminal network, girls are deprived of their freedom by deception or physical coercion and are commodified and reduced to the disposal of others as private property. Here an instrumental treatment of the person reappears, denying the Kantian principle of never being able to conceive of the other as a means (1797-1954). The phenomenon transcends sociological and criminological questions and infuses the wider social fabric through a powerful diffusion of violent codes and degradation, contributing to what has become, for some, an addiction to the denial of human rights. Furthermore, this constitutes an unexpected symptom of the slumber of critical-propositional dissent, evidencing a crisis in empathy, which is seen as a part of the human species and not only the result of its ethical, religious, and cultural elaborations as posited by Boella (2017).

The complexity of the social phenomenon of women’s slavery by Giaretta and Serughetti (2008; 2019) in the racket of forced prostitution has unexpected philosophical-political implications; I identify reflection points to problematise areas that are stratified in democratic societies and narrate female deportation. The use of strong language here is deliberate.

An effective image that evokes the critical condition of humankind’s indifference to its own destruction is *Landscape with The Fall of Icarus*

by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in Escobar (2006). In the painting, Icarus' ruinous fall does not disturb the lightness of the landscape and fails to distract people from their occupations. This image helps me to reflect on freedom and I ask whether it is possible to define freedom as being able to look and see what is happening in front of me, even the ruinous fall of Icarus.

Building upon this, Nancy (2015) sustains that: "today to philosophise corresponds to opening our eyes", or at least to seek to understand the deep lacerations that humanity inflicts upon itself. For Cuomo (2018), a case in point is the oxymoron of a contemporary democracy that seems to remain fearfully inert: unable to react in the face of forced women's prostitution.

3. Women as commodity

Trafficking women must be distinguished from other types of trafficking and exploitation of human beings: it is just one of the ruinous falls that contribute to dehumanisation, a phenomenon that is growing exponentially, linked, but certainly not overlapped with migration⁽³⁾.

The phenomenon of women as commodities requires us to take note of a new mode of horror that dismembers female bodies. Forced to undergo maltreatment and systematic rape, while witnessing those perpetrated against other girls, young women are transformed into fungible goods for sexual purposes and serve only as a function of their own bodies. In this way these women are dispossessed of themselves, of being a subject: transformed into leading lives of adaption or, as Pessina argues (2017), survival.

This aberration is a return to Arendt's category of "crimes against the human condition" (1964). A parallel between the genocides of totalitarianism and human trafficking is not far-fetched since once again a part of humanity is reduced to a fleshly seriality and deprived of a voice. In the context of holocaust, humanity was denied to Jewish people,

(3) Cf. UNODC. 2018. *Global Report on trafficking in Persons 2016*, United Nations, New York, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2016_Global_Report_on_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf.

today it is denied to those women considered “the most extraneous” to the collective identity, which Di Sciullo (2008) considers to be built on what is homogeneous and indistinct after denying the value of difference in the other, even at the physical level. In this political universe, mechanisms of exclusion are inevitable, especially towards those who preserve the value of difference in their bodies. If there is a universal and all-encompassing drift in this way to the detriment of plurality, as recognised by Arendt (1995), there is a decay of democratic institutions themselves. Physical heterogeneity undermines the ideological banality of a society that seeks to expunge diversity and remove any concrete relationship with a distinct person; fabricating the needs and desires of simulacrum partners, who are not considered fully human.

Convinced that philosophy must reconnect thought to life, Cavarero (1998) returns to the figure of Penelope with her skilful weaving work, giving new meaning to embodied being, which is unique and unrepeatable in each and every one. The scandal of enslaved women, who are denied all subjectivity and sentient singularity, transformed instead into fleshly seriality, affects every human being in their ability to see what they are looking at. Young lives forced to sell their bodies like pre-packaged body parts, to rent them for a few minutes, reducing sex to fungible materialism, raises severe questions about the democratic society we inhabit and anthropological thought. Why this inertia? Is it all Ismene’s fault?

If one accepts the classical interpretation of Sophocles’ character Ismene as the paradigm of acquiescence towards a stronger power; a well-known cliché often superficially superimposed on women victims of violence and women enslaved by international trafficking; we must ask ourselves if Ismene is not, instead, the portrait of a society of citizen-spectators, who are inert in the face of Icarus’ fall and incapable of critical dissent.

Ancient democracy provided for slavery, but recognised slaves as having a legal status, evidently a weaker status compared to that of citizens. Fortunately, modern democracy does not allow any form of weakened humanity, making fundamental human rights a strong theoretical reference, even at the level of identity. However, the concrete suffering of various segments of the world’s population, reduced today to a sub-humanity, clashes gravely with this ideological narrative: Bergoglio (2020) therefore discusses a conception of human waste underlying a prevailing

liberalism. Combining the concept of waste with the doctrine of homogeneity and exclusionary mechanisms, we see how its strongly contradictory presence in Western societies is underlined. According to Benhabib (2006), it often results in the ideological legitimacy of a group, without apparently conflicting with fundamental rights. According to Di Sciullo, we should speak of conditional human rights, because the alleged homogeneity of a political community implicitly tends to distinguish human beings with a selective concept of humanity.

Furthermore, and worryingly, the homogenised individual, for Girard (2003), remains a prisoner of the imitative conditioning of desire according to the other and of the Foucaultian device of power that pushes the individual towards the tangible and the instrumental. It is a short step, in the contemporary de-ritualized context, towards the dynamics of rivalry mimesis with unexpected shifts of the persecutory mechanism towards “victims of exchange”, who for Girard (2007) insinuate themselves even into the most intimate relationships.

This is what happens to trafficked women, who are substitute victims already dismembered into many naked bodies. The frightening doubt arises that, in a spiral of hybrid mimicry, some, agitated and compressed by the inadequacy, even sexually, of the imposed models, who are then incapable of a fuller relationship, explode their anger towards the most easily reachable substitute victim. This could also partially explain the rise of femicides.

It is complex to address this theme of the expendables, who represent a discarded humanity that, in Forti’s understanding (2016), we compromise in the name of the system’s stability. In this discussion we recognise how these lives are deemed as “not worthy of mourning”, according to Butler’s (2019) definition: people who are already socially dead. In fact, girls forced into prostitution die the moment they lose their status as subjects, wandering invisibly with torn bodies.

4. Innocent Spectators?

To find a reason for the inert gaze of those who consider themselves extraneous to women’s carnage, one faces the innocence of the West,

which, like a character in a film or a novel by Greene (1957), is so entrenched in its democratic ideals, that people within those places do not realise that they are walking among dying bodies. Citizens' blindness then becomes an ideological problem, whereby a total adherence to the truth of democracy prevents them from seeing the cracks within. This makes them an excellent instrument of the dominant conformity to the triumph of democracy itself, whatever the cost. A blindness that in retrospect, according to Sanyal (2010), ignores its own responsibilities for the history of others, leaving in the background post-colonial studies, which for Casadei (2018) has a connection with human trafficking.

Already Sartre (1962), with Fanon's wretched of the earth, underlines the dichotomous attitude of the colonial and dehumanising politics of the European states that at the same time theorised the return of humanism. It would not, therefore, be the first time that the West has used ideological lenses that prevent it from being horrified by its own destructive responsibilities in the "geographies of hunger". The theme deserves much more in-depth analysis, here I concentrate on the state of suffering of those national territories from which many of the girls who are victims of trafficking come.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to recognise the significant exposure to an indirect ideological conditioning, through homologation, that results in the pain of exclusion from the whole group. It is also important to consider the addiction to the consumption of violent digital images and the intimate relationship between viewer and consumer, with the desire for self-affirmation at the centre. Surprisingly here, the contributions of Foucault (1995) about a contemporaneity imprisoned by a panoptic power becomes significant in the debate's development, building upon the work of Mathiesen (1997) who characterises a democratic capitalist society and develops the synoptic and panoptic dimensions, relating them to each other and seeing them as increasingly constitutive of human beings who control themselves having introduced the synoptic gaze.

A citizen as total spectator emerges completely accustomed to an active and passive control of even the cruellest scenes, which no longer admit any exceptionality. He has learned to survive exposed and observed at all times.

We become accustomed to horror, and here we might evoke Medusa who for Cavarero (2007) is its symbol, embodying the violence that undoes the figural unity of the person: Saramago (2018, p. 233) also maintains, that having eyes in a world of the blind does not constitute any advantage, but rather corresponds to “one who was born to see horror”.

The sovereign people have therefore been transformed into an audience of indifferent spectators who certainly do not see how humanity is negated and undone on the roadsides and not only in the urban peripheries of the polis. Perhaps the excess of spotlights flattens reality into a single dimension of imprisonment and makes everything equally bearable or everything equally indifferent. The withdrawal from the world of the total spectator is thus configured as completely different from the overall view of the spectator-*theatés*, conceived by Arendt (1978) as a witness and support to the philosopher.

Having embraced the dimension of a visual power, symbolised by a technology that prolongs the gaze, consciences are accustomed to a hyper-control and to the viewing of all sorts of raw images, with a powerful confusion between virtual and embodied reality. Moreover, being so completely immersed in a confusion of multimedia images could lead us to say, along with Baudrillard (1976), that technological individuals have been trapped in an invisible network of unreality that conditions “a contingent mode of needs and pleasures”, allowing for the supremacy of the signifier to supplant social order and values. If this were the case, buying sex from women as a simulacrum of pleasure would constitute a representation of enjoyment itself.

It is then, according to Pulcini (2003; 2009), that the significant stresses of a narcissistic dispersion of the postmodern ego reduce the relationship with the world to that of a homologated consumer and spectator: the central axis being the inability to recognise within oneself an authentic desire capable of sustaining the profound balance of the subject. The philosopher advocates a critical approach to desire, with the awareness that desire in and of itself is not a truthful criterion, accepting rather that there are also aspects that are detrimental to the good and autonomy of the subject. Only a shared culture that recognises the need for a process of cognition of one’s own emotionality, which frees desire from a crude immediacy with inauthentic and

negative inclinations, can access a distance from the desired object. This would help the subject move from existences necessitated by an anxiety that engulfs objects of desire, often in an imitative and inauthentic manner. The self-realisation of the subject can then pass through an emancipation of the desiring dimension from homologising to hetero-directed parameters.

The centrality of the homologation-desire binomial reemerges from a different philosophical perspective and, in my opinion, brings the discourse back to the importance of the sense of estrangement from an aspect of humanity; towards the emptying of relationships with otherness that favour an instrumental conception of the other, sustained by the inauthenticity of desire and are oriented towards fungible materiality and become the new idol in need of compulsive consumerism. Through a focus on the desiring dimension and its drifts towards reified bodies such as female bodies transformed into commodities, we see how these women become, as Casadei (2018) observes, “bartered goods” along migrant smuggling routes. These commodities exist in the new structures of capitalism, in which a global apartheid and dehumanisation are spoken.

5. Dehumanisation

Neuroscience intervenes to support the understanding of an indifferent audience, especially with Lakoff (2009) who explores the progressive closing down of mirror neurons in the human race and the consequent inhibition of every empathic instinct that characterises the human race, typically inclined to help the conspecies especially when exposed to violence.

Science, grounding empathy in nature itself, comes to the support of philosophy and warns humanity against a fall without recovery, in which dehumanisation involves the loss of characteristics in the human species, resulting in indifference. There also remains the question of the force that humanity has used so many times to annihilate spontaneous empathy with multiple ideological tools. It is only a few steps short of the radical none-love that Sequeri (2017) describes, of a cruelty without

pathos, a rationalised violence with a “carnality emptied of compassion”. He reflects on the inadequacy of the world’s reckoning of the annihilation of aspects of humanity in the last century by totalitarianism. The focus is not on contingent historical or political conditions, but on the transformation of modern reason into an apathetic reason, incapable of understanding horror and reacting to the un-affective character of culture, and drifts towards the annihilation of the other. Across different segments of the world’s population and across various cultures, something similar is happening today, with a particular emphasis upon women, who are often the object of criminal trafficking.

Re-reading authors who confront the systematic violence of totalitarianism and the inertia of the majority, exploring different historical factors, a disturbing perspective emerges in the democratic Western world of a nameless and stateless slavery, built upon dismembered women’s bodies, sustained by the rapid propagation of violent codes. In a context of depravation, affected by a process of deculturation, involving large swathes of the population caught between consumerism and possession, Todorov (2009) introduces the concept of endemic violence in large cities, where the slaves of racketeering are exposed as low cost and accessible goods, agile replacements for human encounters, objects who only have the appearance of women. These large cities represent a none-place where the monotonous language of violence is acted upon and learned, legitimised and exported. Here Nancy’s (2004) words about the planetary proliferation of abuses and exploitation remain a warning: “man bears witness to his lack of being”, which, from the point of view of an *oikologization*, speaks of the increased dereliction of the sense of the human being in a globalised world, through the widespread and homogenising commodification of desires, extending to human relationships.

The condition of a person first reified and then abused, used in an instrumental fashion as a consumable good, may seem a monstrous exaggeration, recalling the aberrations of totalitarianism and its purges, but is now also combined with a compulsive consumerism. The fact that it is a matter of criminal violence does not exempt us from the obligation to denounce the degree of social endemicity that seems to inhabit everyone to the commodification of existence.

If we are to avoid the all-encompassing abomination it is not enough for the violence to be none state-based, as Kristeva (1981) maintains and I wonder if the horror that the author talks about has found room in the voids of conscience of those who, while looking, are no longer capable of seeing. On the other hand, Sequeri describes a democratic contemporaneity emptied of political culture and spirituality, due to an analytical, none-affective reason that denies every paradigm of the symbolic found in reality, thwarting the perspective of an inclusive anthropology. The theologian explains the tragedy facing the meaning of human by starting with the sense of frustration in the modern subject, who is depicted as a monad obsessed with the search for its own identity, that while deprived of the transcendent and the possibility of the Other, closes in on itself. He hopes for the deconstruction of the self-referential device, of a desire that seeks fulfilment in itself, in favour of an exploration of someone other than oneself. In this perspective, desire becomes generative, breaking the shackles of self-referentiality and rendering the conditions of coexistence creative and lively.

The thesis of Bazzicalupo (2008) is particular pertinent in relation to self-referentiality, through the recognition of a resigned pride, which no longer has any limits to challenge and orients countless existences, homologated by the same self-referential principle, which claims to be freed from all constraints, even from that of recognising life in its consciousness. Especially relevant in the perspective of this essay is the exploration of the root of this pride, with a lack of empathy and the inhospitable apathy of citizens, that becomes the narcosis of society in the face of dehumanisation and male abuse of women in all its forms: thus we move from narcissistic manipulation to violation.

From these varying perspectives, therefore, we can grasp the centrality of indifferent homologation, not only for ethics, but also for a political philosophy that does not want to neglect the deadening of consciences and the exposure to negation and repetitive behaviour.

Considering all these elements in the context of a politics that, according to D'Andrea (2016), from modernity "has undergone a progressive movement" towards the ultimate goal of maximising individual freedom and happiness in terms of well-being and the "acquisition of money in a competitive and competitive context", discussing indifference

towards behaviours harmful to women who are victims of trafficking will seem really insufficient.

We will have to ask ourselves what prevents us from seeing or reacting, from proposing solutions that have the human being at the centre. It is not superfluous to underline what is at stake here because the integrity of enslaved women is human integrity *tout court* with its specificity and uniqueness. Arendt (2004) traces back to the moment of birth as the source of freedom. For the German philosopher (1995), it should be remembered that birth has the power to prevent the decay of democratic ideals, by opposing plurality to pluralism and generalisation. This view of the world strongly conditions the political vision for Cavarero (2019) both in terms of the plurality of opinions and in the centrality of bodies in democracy; explicitly, human beings in flesh and blood.

In the face of widespread female trafficking and the corresponding inertia of democratic society, another important Arendtian category (1951) finds significance: namely, the process of estrangement through which violent fury annihilates human will and invalidates its freedom, propitiating fertile ground for new victims and new torturers. Therefore, as slow, repeated torture produces annihilation and renders the victims helpless, even the habit of violence, of continually living with it, produces an inner death and annihilates any capacity for compassion.

Nearing the conclusions, which I would like to leave open, the phenomenon of trafficked girls proves to be a powerful indicator in the current crisis of Western democratic societies: with spectators accustomed to increasingly heinous scenes and subhuman and instrumentalised bodies now conceivable. In the context of an inclusion-exclusion dynamic, there is a significant reduction in freedom *tout court* and, paradoxically, gender discrimination only enhances the seriousness of the ongoing process of negation. All this centres on indifference and the inability to react to a portion of humanity deprived of all subjectivity, who are transformed into human beings that are already socially dead.

I have tried to define a theoretical framework for the phenomenon of human trafficking, which has a very high human cost, and is often only considered in terms of social and criminal urgency, but which

needs to be placed in a broader interpretative context. Many questions of great weight, however, fall outside the scope of this paper, such as why women and why foreigners.

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