Collateral Damage

Social Inequalities in a Global Age

Zygmunt Bauman

Contents

9

A natural history of evil

It is highly unlikely that a twenty-first-century reader of Anatole France's novel *Les Dieux ont soif*, originally published in 1912,[1] won't be simultaneously bewildered and enraptured. In all likelihood, they will be overwhelmed, as I have been, with admiration for an author who not only, as Milan Kundera would say, managed to 'tear through the curtain of preinterpretations', the 'curtain hanging in front of the world', in order to free 'the great human conflicts from naïve interpretation as a struggle between good and evil, understanding them in the light of tragedy'[2] – which in Kundera's opinion is the calling of novelists and the vocation of all novel-writing – but in addition designed and tested, for the benefit of his readers of the future, as yet unborn, the tools with which to cut and tear the curtains not yet woven, but certain to start being eagerly woven and hung 'in front of the world' well after his novel was finished, and particularly eagerly well after his death . . .

At the moment Anatole France put aside his pen and took one last look at his finished novel, there were no words like 'bolshevism', 'fascism', or indeed 'totalitarianism', listed in dictionaries, French or any other; and no names like Stalin or Hitler in any of the history books. Anatole France's attention was focused on Evariste Gamelin, a juvenile beginner in the world of fine art, a youngster of great talent and promise, but possessing yet greater disgust for Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard and other dictators of popular taste, whose 'bad taste, bad drawings, bad designs', 'complete absence of clear style and clear line', 'complete unawareness of nature and truth' and fondness for 'masks, dolls, fripperies, childish nonsense' he explained by their readiness to 'work for tyrants and slaves'. Gamelin was sure that 'a hundred years hence all Watteau's paintings will have rotted away in attics' and predicted that 'by 1893 art students will be covering the canvases of Boucher with their own rough sketches'. The French Republic, still a tender, unsound and frail child of the Revolution, would grow to cut off, one after the other, the many heads of the hydra of tyranny and slavery, including the dearth of artists' clear style and their blindness to Nature. There is no mercy for the conspirators against the Republic, as there is no liberty for the enemies of liberty, nor tolerance for the enemies of tolerance. To the doubts voiced by his incredulous mother, Gamelin would respond without hesitation: 'We must put our trust in Robespierre; he is incorruptible. Above all, we must trust in Marat. He is the one who really loves the people, who realizes their true interests and serves them. He was always the first to unmask the traitors and frustrate plots.' In one of his few and far between authorial interventions, France explains and brands the thoughts and deeds of his hero and his hero's likes as the 'serene fanaticism' of 'little men, who had demolished the throne itself and turned upside down the old order of things'. On his own way from the youth of a Romanian fascist to the adulthood of a French philosopher, Émile Cioran summed up the lot of youngsters of the era of Robespierre and Marat, and Stalin and Hitler alike: 'Bad luck is their lot. It is they who voice the doctrine of intolerance and it is they who put that doctrine into practice. It is they who are thirsty – for blood, tumult, barbarity.'[3] Well, all the youngsters? And only the youngsters? And only in the eras of Robespierre or Stalin?

For Kant, respect and goodwill for others is an imperative of reason; which means that if a human being, a creature endowed by God or Nature with reason, ponders on Kant's reasoning, she or he will surely recognize and accept the categorical character of that imperative and will adopt it as a precept of her or his conduct. In its essence, the categorical imperative in question boils down to the commandment to treat others as you would wish to be treated by them; in other words, to another version of the

biblical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself – only in the Kantian case grounded on an elaborate and refined series of logical arguments, and thus invoking the authority of *human reason* as able to judge what needs to be and must be, instead of the *will of God* deciding what ought to be.

In such a translation from sacred to secular language something of the commandment's persuasive powers is lost, however. The will of God, unashamedly 'decisionist', can *bestow* apodictic, unquestionable power on the presumption of an essential, preordained and inescapable symmetry of interhuman relations, a presumption indispensable for both the sacred and the secular versions; whereas reason would have a lot of trouble *demonstrating* that presumption's veracity. The assertion of the symmetry of interhuman relations belongs, after all, in the universe of beliefs, of what is taken for granted or stipulated (and may therefore be accepted on the grounds of 'if would be better, if . . .' or 'we owe obedience to God's will'); but it has no place in the universe of empirically testable knowledge – that domain, or rather the natural habitat, of reason. Whether the advocates of the legislative powers of reason refer to reason's infallibility in its search for truth (for 'how things indeed are and cannot but be'), or to reason's utilitarian merits (that is, its ability to separate realistic, feasible and plausible intentions from mere daydreaming), they will find it difficult to argue convincingly for the reality of symmetry, and still more difficult to prove the usefulness of practising it.

The problem is the paucity, to say the least, of experiential evidence supporting the debated presumption, whereas reason rests its claim to the last word where there is contention on its resolution to ground its judgements precisely in that kind of evidence, while dismissing the validity of all other grounds. Another, yet closely related problem is the profusion of contrary evidence: namely, that when promoting the effectiveness of human undertakings and humans' dexterity in reaching their objectives, reason focuses on liberating its carriers from constraints imposed on their choices by symmetry, mutuality, reversibility of actions and obligations; in other words, on creating situations in which the carriers of reason may quietly strike off the list of factors relevant to their choices the apprehension that the course of action they take may rebound on them – or, to put it brutally, yet more to the point,

that evil may boomerang back on the evildoers. Contrary to Kant's hope, common reason seems to deploy most of its time and energy in the service of disarming and incapacitating the demands and pressures of the allegedly categorical imperative. According to the precepts of reason, the most reasonable, most worthy of attention and most commendable principles of action are those of pre-empting or abolishing the symmetry between the actors and the objects of their actions; or at least those stratagems that, once deployed, reduce to a minimum the chances of reciprocation. Whatever 'stands to reason' all too often flatly refuses to 'stand to demands of morality'. At any rate, it loses none of its reasonableness when it fails a moral test.

Reason is a service station of power. It is, first and foremost, a factory of might (*Macht, pouvoir*), defined as the subject's capacity to reach objectives despite the resistance – whether of inert matter or of subjects pursuing different aims. 'To be mighty' means, in other words, the ability to overcome the inertia of a recalcitrant object of action or to ignore the ambitions of other *dramatis personae* (to wit, to enjoy the sole subjectivity and the sole effective intentionality in the multi-actor drama, and so reduce the other subjects to the status of the objects of action or its neutral backdrop). By its very nature, might and power are asymmetrical (one is tempted to say: just as nature stands no void, power stands no symmetry). Power does not unify and does not level up (or down) differences; power divides and opposes. Power is a sworn enemy and suppressor of symmetry, reciprocity and mutuality. Power's might consists in its potency to manipulate probabilities and differentiate possibilities as well as potentialities and chances: all through sealing up the resulting divisions and immunizing inequalities of distribution against dissent and appeals from those at the receiving end of the operation.

In a nutshell, power and the might to act, the production and the servicing of which are the calling of reason, equal an explicit rejection or ignoring in practice of the presumption which renders Kant's imperative categorical. As vividly and poignantly expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche:

What is good? All that enhances the feeling of power . . . What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness . . . The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our humanity. And they

ought even be helped to perish. What is more harmful than any vice? – Practical sympathy with all the botched and weak ... .[4]

'I know joy in destruction', Nietzsche admitted, proudly. 'I am therewith *destroyer par excellence*.'[5] Several generations of other 'destroyers par excellence', armed with weapons adequate to making the words flesh (and more to the point, to make the words *kill* the flesh), who worked hard to make Nietzsche's vision reality, could draw inspiration there – and many among them did. They would find absolution for their intention in Nietzsche's exhortation to help the weak and the botched to perish. As Zarathustra, Nietzsche's authorized spokesman and plenipotentiary, puts it: 'My greatest danger always lay in indulgence and sufferance; and all humankind wants to be indulged and suffered.'[6] The verdicts of Nature can be tinkered with only at the tinkerers' peril and ruin. To avoid ruin, humans must be freed: the high and mighty from pity, compassion, (unjustly) guilty conscience and (uncalled for) *scruples* – and the vulgar and lowly from *hope*.

Efforts to crack one mystery that perhaps more than any other keeps ethical philosophers awake at night, namely the mystery of *unde malum* (whence evil?), and more specifically and yet more urgently of 'how good people turn evil'[7] (or, more to the point, the secret of the mysterious transmogrification of caring family people, and friendly and benevolent neighbours, into monsters), were triggered and given a first powerful push by the rising tide of twentieth-century totalitarianism, set in feverish motion by the Holocaust revelations, and accelerated still further by growing evidence of an ever more noticeable likeness between the post-Holocaust world and a minefield, of which one knows that an explosion must occur sooner or later, yet no one knows when and where.

From the start, the efforts to crack the aforementioned mystery have followed three different tracks; in all probability, they will continue to follow all three of them for a long time to come, as none of the three trajectories seems to possess a final station where the explorers can rest satisfied they have reached the intended destination of their journey. The purpose of their exploration is, after all, to catch in the net of reason the kinds of phenomena

described by Günther Anders as 'over-liminal' (*überschwellige*): phenomena that cannot be grasped and intellectually assimilated because they outgrow any sensual or conceptual nets, thereby sharing the fate of their apparent opposite, 'subliminal' (*unterschwellige*) phenomena – tiny and fast moving enough to escape even the densest of nets, and to vanish before they can be caught and sent over to reason for intelligent recycling.

The first track (most recently seeming to be taken by Jonathan Littell in his book *The Kindly Ones*,[8] with only a few, less than crucial, qualifications) leads to a delving into and fathoming of *psychical* peculiarities (or psychical sediments of biographical peculiarities) discovered or hypothesized among *individuals* who are known to have committed cruel acts or who have been caught red-handed, these are therefore assumed to outdo average individuals in their inclination and eagerness to commit atrocities when they are tempted or commanded to do so. That track was laid even before the monstrous human deeds of the post-Holocaust era revealed the full awesomeness of the potential scale of the problem. It was started by Theodore Adorno's highly influential and memorable 'authoritarian personality' study, promoting the idea of, so to speak, the self-selection of the evildoers – and suggesting that the self-selection in question was determined by natural rather than nurtured predispositions of individual character.

Another, perhaps the widest and most massively trodden track, was laid along the line of behavioural *conditioning* and led to an investigation of the types of social positionings or situations that might prompt individuals – 'normal' under 'ordinary' or the most common circumstances – to join in the perpetration of evil deeds; or, to express it another way, conditions awakening evil predispositions that under different conditions would have remained fast asleep. For scholars following this track, it was society of a certain type, not certain individual features, that belonged on the defendant's bench. Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, or Hans Speier, sought in the unstoppably multiplying ranks of the *Angestellte* (office workers) the source of the foul moral atmosphere that favoured recruitment to the army of evil. That malodorous, indeed morally poisonous atmosphere was shortly afterwards ascribed by Hannah Arendt to the 'proto-totalitarian' predispositions of the bourgeois, or to the philistinism and vulgarity of classes

forcibly reforged into masses (following the principle of 'Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral', as Bertolt Brecht succinctly put it).[9]

Hannah Arendt, arguably the most prominent spokesperson for this way of thinking, sharply and uncompromisingly opposing the reduction of social phenomena to the individual psyche, observed that the true genius among the Nazi seducers was Himmler, who – neither descending from bohemianism as Goebbels did, nor being a sexual pervert like Julius Streicher, an adventurer like Goering, a fanatic like Hitler or a madman like Alfred Rosenberg – 'organized the masses into a system of total domination', thanks to his (correct!) assumption that in their decisive majority men are not vampires or sadists, but job-holders and family providers.[10] Where that observation ultimately led her, we can learn from her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* The most widely quoted of Arendt's conclusions was her succinct verdict of the banality of evil. What Arendt meant when she pronounced that verdict was that monstrosities do not need monsters, outrages do not need outrageous characters, and that the trouble with Eichmann lay precisely in the fact that, according to the assessments of supreme luminaries of psychology and psychiatry, he (alongside so many of his companions in crime) was not a monster or a sadist, but outrageously, terribly, frighteningly 'normal'. Littell would at least partly follow that conclusion of Arendt's in his insistence that Eichmann was anything but a 'faceless, soulless robot'. Among the most recent studies following that line, *The Lucifer Effect* by Philip Zimbardo, published in 2007, is a blood-curdling and nerve-racking study of a bunch of good, ordinary, likeable and popular American lads and lasses who turned into monsters once they had been transported to a sort of 'nowhere place', to the faraway country of Iraq, and put in charge of prisoners charged with ill intentions and suspected of belonging to an inferior brand of human being, or possibly being somewhat less than human.

How safe and comfortable, cosy and friendly the world would feel if it were monsters and monsters alone who perpetrated monstrous deeds. Against monsters we are fairly well protected, and so we can rest assured that we are insured against the evil deeds that monsters are capable of and threaten to perpetrate. We have psychologists to spot psychopaths and sociopaths, we have soci-

ologists to tell us where they are likely to propagate and congregate, we have judges to condemn them to confinement and isolation, and police or psychiatrists to make sure they stay there. Alas, the good, ordinary, likeable American lads and lasses were neither monsters nor perverts. Had they not been assigned to lord over the inmates of Abu Ghraib, we would *never* have known (surmised, guessed, imagined, fantasized) the horrifying things they were capable of contriving. It wouldn't occur to any of us that the smiling girl at the counter might, once on overseas assignment, excel at devising ever more clever and fanciful, as well as wicked and perverse tricks to harass, molest, torture and humiliate her wards. In her and her companions' hometowns, their neighbours refuse to believe to this very day that those charming lads and lasses they have known since their childhoods are the same folk as the monsters in the snapshots of the Abu Ghraib torture chambers. But they are.

In the conclusion of his psychological study of Chip Frederick, the suspected leader and guide of the torturers' pack, Philip Zimbardo had to say that there was absolutely nothing in his record that he was able to uncover that would have predicted that Chip Frederick would engage in any form of abusive, sadistic behaviour. On the contrary, there was much in his record to suggest that had he not been forced to work and live in such an abnormal situation, he might have been the military's all-American poster soldier on its recruitment ads.

Indeed, Chip Frederick would have passed with flying colours any imaginable psychological test, as well as the most thorough scrutiny of the record of behaviour routinely applied in selecting candidates for the most responsible and morally sensitive services, such as those of the official, uniformed guardians of law and order. In the case of Chip Frederick and his closest and most notorious companion, Lynndie England, you might still insist (even if counterfactually) that they had acted on command and had been forced to engage in atrocities they detested and abhorred – meek sheep rather than predatory wolves. The sole charge against them you might then approve would be that of cowardice or exaggerated respect for their superiors; at the utmost, the charge of having too easily, without as much as a murmur of protest, abandoned the moral principles which guided them in their 'ordinary' life at home. But what about those at the top of bureaucratic ladder?

Those who gave commands, forced obedience and punished the disobedient? Those people, surely, must have been monsters?

The inquiry into the Abu Ghraib outrage never reached the top echelons of the American military command; for the top, command-issuing people to be brought to account and tried for war crimes, they would first need to find themselves on the defeated side in the war they waged – which they did not. But Adolf Eichmann, presiding over the tools and procedures of the 'final solution' of the 'Jewish problem' and giving orders to their operators, was on the side of the defeated, had been captured by victors and brought to their courts. There was occasion, therefore, to submit the 'monster hypothesis' to a most careful, indeed meticulous scrutiny – and by the most distinguished members of the psychological and psychiatric professions. The final conclusion drawn from that most thorough and reliable research was anything but ambiguous. Here it is, as conveyed by Hannah Arendt:

> Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal' – 'More normal, at any rate, than I am after examining him', one of them was said to have exclaimed, while another had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude towards wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters and friends was 'not only normal but most desirable'. ... The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together . . .[11]

It must indeed have been the most terrifying of findings: if it is not ogres but normal people (I am tempted to add 'guys like you and me') who commit atrocities and are capable of acting in a perverted and sadistic way, then all the sieves we've invented and put in place to strain out the carriers of inhumanity from the rest of the human species are either botched in execution or misconceived from the start – and most certainly ineffective. And so we are, to cut a long story short, *un*protected (one is tempted to add 'defenceless against our shared morbid capacity'). Employing their ingenuity to the utmost and trying as hard as they could to 'civilize' human manners and the patterns of human togetherness, our ancestors, and also those of us who have followed their line

of thought and action, are, so to speak, barking up a wrong tree . . .

Reading *The Kindly Ones* attentively, one can unpack a covert critique of the common interpretation, endorsed by Arendt herself, of the 'banality of evil' thesis: namely, the supposition that the evildoer Eichmann was an 'unthinking man'. From Littell's portrayal, Eichmann emerges as anything but an unthinking follower of orders or a slave to his own base passions. 'He was certainly not an *enemy of mankind* described in Nuremberg,' 'nor was he an incarnation of *banal evil*', he was on the contrary 'a very talented bureaucrat, extremely competent at his functions, with a certain stature and a considerable sense of personal initiative'.[12] As a manager, Eichmann would most certainly be the pride of any reputable European firm (one could add, including companies with Jewish owners or top executives). Littell's narrator, Dr Aue, insists that in the many personal encounters he had with Eichmann he never noticed any trace of a personal prejudice against, let alone a passionate hatred, of the Jews, whom he saw as no more, though no less either, than objects which his office demanded to be duly processed. Whether at home or in his job, Eichmann was consistently the same person, the kind of person he was, for instance, when he performed two Brahms quartets with his SS mates: 'Eichmann played calmly, methodically, his eyes riveted to the score; he didn't make any mistakes.'[13]

If Eichmann was 'normal', then no one is a priori exempt from suspicion – none of our dazzlingly normal friends and acquaintances; and neither are we. Chip Fredericks and Adolf Eichmanns walk our streets in full view, queue like us at the checkouts of the same shops, fill cinemas and football grandstands, travel on trains and city buses or get stuck next to us in traffic jams. They might live next door, or even sit at our dining table. All of them, given propitious circumstances, might do what Chip Frederick or Adolf Eichmann did. And what about me?! Since so many people can potentially commit acts of humanity, I might easily by chance, by a mere caprice of fate, become one of their victims. *They* can do it – I already know that. But isn't it also the case that equally easily *I myself* might become one of 'them': just another 'ordinary human' who can do to other humans what they have done . . .

John M. Steiner used the metaphor of a 'sleeper',[14] drawn from the terminology of spy networks, to denote an as yet undisclosed

personal inclination to commit acts of violence, or a person's vulnerability to the temptation to join in such acts – an odious potential that may hypothetically be present in particular individuals while long remaining invisible; an inclination that can (is bound to?) surface, or a vulnerability that may be revealed, only under some particularly propitious conditions, presumably once the forces that hitherto repressed it and kept it under cover are abruptly weakened or removed. Ervin Staub moved one (gigantic) step further, deleting both references to 'particularity' in Steiner's proposition and hypothesizing the presence of malevolent 'sleepers' in most, perhaps all human beings: 'Evil . . . committed by ordinary people is the norm, not an exception.' Is he right? We don't know and never will know, at least never know for sure, because there is no way to prove or disprove that guess empirically. Possibilities are not unlike chickens: they can be reliably and definitely counted only once they are hatched.

What do we know for sure? The ease 'with which sadistic behaviour could be elicited in individuals who were not "sadistic types"' was discovered by Zimbardo in his earlier experiments conducted at Stanford University with students randomly selected to play the role of 'prison guards' towards fellow students, also randomly cast in the role of prisoners.[15] Stanley Milgram, in his Yale experiments with people, again randomly chosen, who were asked to inflict on other people a series of what they were made to believe were painful electric shocks of escalating magnitude found that 'obedience to authority', any authority, regardless of the nature of the commands given by that authority, is a 'deeply ingrained behaviour tendency' even if the subjects find the actions they are told to perform repugnant and revolting.[16] If you add to that factor such well-nigh universal sediments of socialization as the attributes of loyalty, sense of duty and discipline, 'men are led to kill with little difficulty'. It is easy, in other words, to prod, push, seduce and entice non-evil people to commit evil things.

Christopher R. Browning investigated the twisted yet invariably gory path of men belonging to the German Reserve Police Battalion 101, assigned to the police from among conscripts unfit for frontline duty, and eventually delegated to participate in the mass murder of Jews in Poland.[17] Those people, who had never been known to commit violent, let alone murderous acts up till then,

and gave no grounds for suspicion that they were capable of committing them, were ready (not 100 per cent of them, but a considerable majority) to comply with the command to murder: to shoot, point blank, men and women, old people and children, who were unarmed and obviously innocent since they had not been charged with any crime, none of whom nurturing the slightest intention to harm them or their comrades-in-arms. What Browning found, however (and published under the tell-all title of *Ordinary Men*), was that only about 10 to 20 per cent of the conscripted policemen proved to be 'refusers and evaders', who asked to be excused from carrying out the orders, that there was also 'a nucleus of increasingly enthusiastic killers who volunteered for the firing squads and "Jew hunts"', but that by far the largest group of conscript policemen placidly performed the role of murderers and ghetto clearers when it was assigned to them, though without seeking opportunities to kill on their own initiative. The most striking aspect of that finding was in my view the amazing similarity of Browning's statistical distribution of zealots, abstainers and impassioned 'neither–nors' to that of the reactions of the subjects of Zimbardo's and Milgram's experiments to the authoritatively endorsed commands. In all three cases, some people ordered to commit cruelty were only too eager to leap to the occasion and give vent to their evil drives; some – roughly the same number – refused to do evil whatever the circumstances and whatever the consequences of their abstention; whereas an extensive 'middle ground' was filled by people who were indifferent, lukewarm and not particularly engaged or strongly committed to one or the other end of the attitudinal spectrum, avoiding taking any stand, whether for morality or against it, and preferring instead to follow the line of least resistance and do whatever prudence dictated, and unconcern allowed.

In other words, in all three cases (as well as in innumerable others in the extensive set of studies of which these three investigations have been acclaimed as the most spectacular and illuminating examples), the distribution of probabilities that the command to do evil will be obeyed or resisted has followed the standard known in statistics as the Gaussian curve (sometimes called the Gaussian bell, Gaussian distribution, or Gaussian function), believed to be the graph of the most common and prototypical, to wit 'normal', distribution of probabilities. We read in Wikipedia

that what the notion of the Gaussian curve refers to is the tendency of results to 'cluster around a mean or average'. 'The graph of the associated probability density function is bell-shaped, with a peak at the mean.' We also read that 'by the central limit theorem, any variable that is the sum of a large number of independent factors is likely to be normally distributed'.

As the probabilities of various behavioural responses by people exposed to the pressure to do evil show a clear tendency to take the form of a Gaussian curve, we can risk the supposition that, in their case as well, the results were compounded by the mutual interference of a large number of independent factors: commands descending from on high, instinctual or deeply entrenched respect for or fear of authority, loyalty reinforced by considerations of duty and drilled discipline – these were some of them, but not necessarily the only ones.

The possible silver lining to this uniformly dark cloud is that it seems plausible (just plausible . . .) that under conditions of liquid modernity, marked by a loosening or dissipation of bureaucratic hierarchies of authority, as well as by the multiplication of sites from which competitive recommendations are voiced (the two factors responsible for the rising incoherence and diminishing audibility of those voices), other, more individual, idiosyncratic and personal factors, for instance personal character, may play an increasingly important role in the choice of responses. The humanity of humans might gain if they did.

And yet our shared experience thus far offers few, if any, reasons to be optimistic. As W. G. Sebald suggests (in his 1999 *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, translated by Anthea Bell as *On the Natural History of Destruction*), 'we are unable to learn from the misfortunes we bring on ourselves' and 'we are incorrigible and will continue along the beaten tracks that bear some slight relation to the old road network'.[18] Bent as we all are, by nature or training, on seeking and finding the shortest way to the aims we pursue and believe to be worth pursuing, 'misfortunes' (and particularly misfortunes suffered by others) do not seem an excessively high price to pay for shortening the route, cutting costs and magnifying the effects.

Sebald quotes, after Alexander Kluge's *Unheimlichkeit der Zeit*, an interview conducted by a German journalist, Künzert, with the US Eighth Army Air Force Brigadier Frederick L. Anderson.

Pressed by Kunzert to explain whether there was a way to prevent or avoid the destruction of Halberstadt, his home town, by American carpet bombing, Anderson responded that the bombs were, after all, 'expensive items'. 'In practice, they couldn't have been dropped over mountains or open country after so much labour had gone into making them at home.'[19] Anderson, uncommonly frank, hit the nail on the head; it was not the need to do something about Halberstadt that decided the use of the bombs, but the need to do something with the bombs that decided the fate of Halberstadt. Halberstadt was just a 'collateral casualty' (to update the language of the military) of the success of the bomb factories. As Sebald explains, 'once the matériel was manufactured, simply letting the aircraft and their valuable freight stand idle on the airfields of eastern England ran counter to any healthy economic instinct'.[20]

That 'economic instinct' might perhaps have had the first, but most certainly did have the last word in the debate about the propriety and usefulness of the strategy of Sir Arthur ('Bomber') Harris: the destruction of German cities went into full and unstoppable swing well after the spring of 1944, when it had already dawned on policy makers and the givers of military orders that – contrary to the officially proclaimed objective of the air campaign and its protracted, determined, lavish and zealous execution, pulling no punches, – 'the morale of the German population was obviously unbroken, while industrial production was impaired only marginally at best, and the end of the war had not come a day closer'. By the time of that discovery, and disclosure, 'the matériel' in question had already been manufactured and was filling the warehouses to capacity; letting it lie idle would indeed 'counter any healthy economic instinct', or, to put it simply, would make no 'economic sense' (according to an estimate by A. J. P. Taylor, quoted by Max Hastings in his 1979 study *Bomber Command*, p. 349, the servicing of the bombing campaign after all engaged and 'swallowed up' one-third of total British production servicing the war).

We have so far sketched and compared two tracks along which the search for an answer to the *unde malum* has proceeded in recent times. There is, however, a third track, too, which due to the universality and extemporality of the factors it invokes and

deploys in the pursuit of understanding deserves to be called *anthropological*. This is a perspective that with the passage of time seems to rise in importance and promise, just as the other two sketched above near the exhaustion of their cognitive potential. We could intuit the direction of that third track in Sebald's study. It had already been laid out before, however, in Günther Anders' seminal study, overlooked or neglected for a few decades, of the phenomenon of the 'Nagasaki syndrome', charged by Anders with the fully and truly apocalyptic potential of 'globocide'.[21] The 'Nagasaki syndrome', Anders suggested, means that 'what has been done once can be repeated over again, with ever weaker reservations'; with each successive case, more and more 'matter-of-factly, casually, with little deliberation or motive'. 'The repetition of outrage is not just possible, but probable – as the chance to win the battle to prevent it gets smaller, while that of losing it rises.'

The decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, and three days later on Nagasaki, was officially explained, ex-post facto, by the need to bring forward the capitulation of Japan in order to save the countless American lives which most certainly would have been lost if the American army had had to invade the Japanese archipelago. The jury of history is still in session, but the official version of the motive, justifying the meanness and villainy of the means by reference to the grandiosity and nobility of the goals, has been recently cast into doubt by American historians examining newly declassified information about the circumstances in which the decision was considered, taken and implemented, allowing the official version to be questioned not only on moral, but also on factual grounds. As the critics of the official version aver, the rulers of Japan were ready to capitulate a month or so before the first atom bomb was dropped – and just two steps would have caused them to lay down arms: Truman's consent to the Soviet Army joining the war with Japan, and the commitments of the allies to keep the Emperor on his throne after Japan's surrender.

Truman, however, procrastinated. He waited for the results of the test which was set to be conducted in Alamogordo in New Mexico, where final touches were about to be put on the performance of the first atomic bombs. The news of the results did

arrive, in Potsdam on 17 July: the test was not just successful – the impact of the explosion eclipsed the boldest of expectations . . . Resenting the idea of consigning an exorbitantly expensive technology to waste, Truman started playing for time. The genuine stake of his procrastination could easily be deduced from the triumphant presidential address published in the *New York Times* on the day following the destruction of a hundred thousand lives in Hiroshima: 'We made the most audacious scientific bet in history, a bet of 2 billion dollars – and won.' One just couldn't waste 2 billion dollars, could one? If the original objective is reached before the product has had a chance to be used, one has to promptly find another aim that will preserve or restore 'economic sense' to the expenditure . . .

On 16 March 1945, when Nazi Germany was already on its knees and the speedy end of the war was no longer in doubt, Arthur 'Bomber' Harris sent out 225 Lancaster bombers and eleven Mosquito fighter planes with orders to discharge 289 tons of explosives and 573 tons of incendiary substances on Würzburg, a middle-sized town with 107,000 residents, rich in history and art treasures, and poor in industry. Between 9.20 and 9.37 p.m. about 5,000 inhabitants (of whom 66 per cent were women and 14 per cent children) were killed, while 21,000 dwelling houses were set on fire: only 6,000 residents still found a roof over their heads once the planes had left. Hermann Knell, who calculated the figures above after scrupulous scrutiny of the archives,[22] asks why a town devoid of any kind of strategic significance (an opinion confirmed, even if in a roundabout way, by the omission of any mention of that town's name in the official history of the Royal Air Force, which meticulously lists all its accomplishments, even the most minute) was selected for destruction. Having examined all conceivable alternative causes, and disqualified them one by one, Knell was left with the sole sensible answer to his question: that Arthur Harris and Carl Spaatz (the commander of the US Air Force in Great Britain and Italy) found themselves short of targets at the beginning of 1945:

The bombing progressed as planned without consideration of the changed military situation. The destruction of German cities continued until the end of April. Seemingly once the military

machine was moving it could not be stopped. It had a life of its own. There was now all the equipment and soldiers on hand. It must have been that aspect that made Harris decide to have Würzburg attacked'...

But why Würzburg of all places? Purely for reasons of convenience. As previous reconnaissance sorties had shown, 'the city could easily be located with the electronic aids available at the time'. And the city was sufficiently distant from the advancing allied troops to reduce the threat of another case of 'friendly fire' (i.e., dropping bombs on one's own troops). In other words, the town was 'an easy and riskless target'. This was Würzburg's inadvertent and unwitting fault, a kind of fault for which no 'target' would ever be pardoned once 'the military machine was moving'...

In *La Violence nazie: une généalogie européenne* Enzo Traverso puts forward a concept of the 'barbaric potential' of modern civilization.[23] In his study dedicated to Nazi violence he comes to the conclusion that the Nazi-style atrocities were unique solely in the sense of synthesizing a large number of the means of enslavement and annihilation already tested, though separately, in the history of Western civilization.

> The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki prove that anti-Enlightenment sentiments are not necessary conditions of technological massacre. The two atomic bombs, like the Nazi camps, were elements of the 'civilizing process', manifestations of one of its potentials, one of its faces and one of its possible ramifications.

Traverso finishes his exploration with a warning that there are no grounds whatsoever for excluding the possibility of other syntheses in the future – ones no less murderous than those of the Nazis. The liberal, civilized Europe of the twentieth century proved to be, after all, a laboratory of violence. Myself, I'd add that there are no signs of that laboratory having been shut or of operation ceasing at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Günther Anders asks: are we, in this age of machines, the last relics of the past who have not as yet managed to clean off the toxic sediments of past atrocities?[24] And he answers: the outrages under discussion were committed *then* not because they were *still*

feasible (or had *so far* failed to be eradicated), but on the contrary, they were *already* perpetrated then because then they had *already* become feasible and plausible...

Let me sum up: there must have been a 'first moment' when the technologically assisted atrocities that had been inconceivable until then became feasible. Those atrocities must have had their moment of beginning, their starting point – but it does not follow that they must have an end as well. It does not follow that they entered human cohabitation only for a brief visit, and even less that they brought with them or set in motion mechanisms that were bound sooner or later to cause their departure. It is rather the other way round: once a contraption allowing the separation of technological capacity from moral imagination is put in place, it becomes self-propelling, self-reinforcing and self-reinvigorating. The human capacity to adjust, habituate, become accustomed, to start today from the point reached the evening before, and all in all to recycle the inconceivability of yesterday into today's fact of the matter will see to that.

Atrocities, in other words, do not self-condemn and self-destruct. They, on the contrary, self-reproduce: what was once an unexpectedly horrifying turn of fate and a shock (an awesome discovery; a gruesome revelation) degenerates into a routine conditioned reflex. Hiroshima was a shock with deafeningly loud and seemingly inextinguishable echoes. Three days later, Nagasaki was hardly a shock, evoking few if any echoes. Joseph Roth has pointed to one of the mechanisms of that desensitizing habituation:

> When a catastrophe occurs, people at hand are shocked into helpfulness. Certainly, acute catastrophes have that effect. It seems that people expect catastrophes to be brief. But chronic catastrophes are so unpalatable to neighbours that they gradually become indifferent to them and their victims, if not downright impatient... Once the emergency becomes protracted, helping hands return to pockets, the fires of compassion cool down.[25]

In other words, a protracted catastrophe blazes the trail of its own continuation by consigning the initial shock and outrage to oblivion and thus emaciates and enfeebles human solidarity with its victims, so sapping the possibility of joining forces for the sake of staving off future victimization...

But how and why did the said atrocities come to be in the first place? For explorers of the sources of evil, it is Anders, it seems, who sketches yet another approach, best called *metaphysical*. Its antecedents can be detected in Heidegger's concept of *techne*, though curiously that acclaimed metaphysician of being-in-time set techne beyond historical time, in the metaphysics of *Sein* – being – *as such*, thereby presenting techne as a history-immune, intractable and unchangeable attribute of all and any being. Anders, on the other hand, is intensely aware of the intimate interdependence of techne and history and the sensitivity of techne to the historical transmutations of forms of life. Anders, it can be seen, focused on a metaphysics of evil made to the measure of our times, a specific evil, uniquely endemic to our own present and still continuing form of human cohabitation: a form defined and set apart from other forms by a techne (a product, in the last account, of the human power of imagination) racing far *beyond human imagining powers* and in its turn overpowering, enslaving and disabling the very human capacity that brought it into being. A prototype of the convoluted, meandering story of Andersian 'techne' needs to be sought, perhaps, in the ancient saga of the sorcerer's wayward apprentice, Hegel's and Marx's physiology of alienation, and closer to our times in Georg Simmel's idea of the 'tragedy of culture' – of the products of the human spirit rising to a volume transcending and leaving far behind the human power of absorption, comprehension, assimilation and mastery.

According to Anders, the human power to produce (*herstellen*: having things done, plans implemented) has been emancipated in recent decades from the constraints imposed by the much less expandable power of humans to imagine, represent and render intelligible (*vorstellen*). It is in that relatively new phenomenon, the hiatus (*Diskrepanz*) separating the human powers of creation and imagination, that the contemporary variety of evil sets its roots. The moral calamity of our time 'does not grow from our sensuality or perfidy, dishonesty or licentiousness, nor even from exploitation – but from a deficit of imagination'; whereas imagination, as Anders untiringly insists, grasps more of the 'truth' (*nimmt mehr 'wahr'*), than our machine-driven empirical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) is capable of.[26] I would add: imagination also

grasps infinitely more of the *moral* truth, in encountering which our empirical perception is especially blindfolded.

The reality grasped by perception orphaned by imagination, and beyond which it is unable to reach, is always-already-made, technologically prefabricated and operated; there is no room in it for those thousands or millions cast at its receiving end and sentenced to destruction by atomic bombs, napalm or poisonous gas. That reality consists of keyboards and pushbuttons. And, as Anders points out, 'one doesn't gnash one's teeth when pressing a button . . . A key is a key.'[27] Whether the pressing of the key starts a kitchen contraption making ice-cream, feeds current into an electricity network or lets loose the Horsemen of the Apocalypse makes no difference. 'The gesture that will initiate the Apocalypse will not differ from any of the other gestures – and it will be performed, like all the other identical gestures, by an operator similarly guided and bored by routine.' 'If something symbolizes the satanic nature of our situation, it is precisely that innocence of the gesture;'[28] the negligibility of the effort and thought needed to set off a cataclysm – any cataclysm, including globocide. *We are technologically all-powerful because of, and thanks to, the powerlessness of our imagination.*

Powerless as we are, we are omnipotent, since we are capable of bringing into being forces able in their turn to cause effects which we wouldn't be able to produce with our 'natural equipment' – our own hands and muscles. But having become all-powerful in that way, watching and admiring the might and efficiency and the shattering effects of entities we have ourselves designed and conjured up, we discover our own powerlessness . . . That discovery comes together with another: that of the *pride* of inventing and setting in motion magnificent machines able to perform Herculean deeds which we would be otherwise incapable of performing. By the same token, we feel *challenged*, however, by the standards of perfection we've set for the machines brought into being by us, but which we ourselves can't match. And so, finally, we discover *shame*: the ignominy of our own inferiority, and thus the humiliation which overwhelms us when we face up to our own impotence.

Those three discoveries combine, as Anders suggests, into the 'Promethean complex'. Anders has names for the objects of

each discovery: Promethean pride, Promethean challenge, and Promethean shame.[29] The latter is the sense of one's own inborn inferiority and imperfection, both blatant once they are juxtaposed with the perfection, nay omnipotence, of made-up things; the outcome of the indignity brought upon us in the last account by our failure to self-reify, to become *like* the machines: indomitable, irresistible, unsubmissive and indeed ungovernable, as the machines are 'at their best'. To mitigate that infamy, we need to demonstrate our own ability to accomplish, by our own natural means and bodily effort and without the help of the machines, things which the machines so easily, matter-of-factly perform: by turning themselves, in other words, into means for the means, tools for the tools . . . when they had watched from their low-flying war machines, avidly and at close quarters, the ravages perpetrated by the tools of murder and devastation sprinkled over the village of My Lai; Lieutenant Calley's soldiers could not resist the challenge or temptation to perform personally, with their bare hands, what their weapons achieved mechanically: the temptation to catch up with the tools of destruction and to overtake them in the chase for perfection – if only for a moment and only here and now, in this village.[30] The sight of inanimate objects harnessed to the gory job widened the soldiers' *horizons*, uncovered unthought-of *possibilities*, stimulated the *imagination* – but these were horizons already drawn by machines, possibilities opened up by mechanical conduct, and imagination industrially prefabricated.

In his second open letter to Klaus Eichmann,[31] Anders writes of the relation between the criminal Nazi state and the post-Nazi, contemporary, world regime: 'The affinity between the technical-totalitarian empire which threatens us and the monstrous Nazi empire is evident.' But he hastens to explain right away that he intends the above statement as a provocation, aimed against the widespread (because comforting) opinion that the Third Reich was a unique phenomenon, an aberration untypical of our times and particularly in our Western world; an opinion which owes its popularity to its treacherous potency in exonerating and legitimizing a turning away of one's eyes from one's own gruesome, terrifying potential. Personally, I deeply regret that I was not aware of these conclusions of Anders, when I was working on my *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

In response to a journalist's suggestion that he belongs in the ranks of 'panicmongers', Anders replied that he considers the title of 'panicmonger' to be a distinction and wears it with pride – adding that 'in our days, the most important moral task is to make people aware that they need to be alarmed – and that the fears that haunt them have valid reasons'.[32]

3   Carl Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen, Zwischenbemerküng zum Begriff des Politischen*, Duncker & Humboldt, 1963, p. 80. See the discussion in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 137.
4   Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 19–21, emphasis added. See discussion in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 15ff.
5   Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 18, emphasis added.
6   Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2002; Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis*, Seuil, 2005.
7   Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Lettre à Monsieur de Voltaire', in *Oeuvres complètes*, Pléiade, 1959, vol, 4, p. 1062.
8   Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 230, emphasis added.
9   Ibid., pp. 240, 281.
10 In other words, the unavoidable evil was suffered by the innocent and the guilty alike.
11 Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 112.
12 See Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Postwar European Thought*, Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 4–5.
13 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 37.
14 Ibid., p. 48.
15 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (from *Der Begriff des Politischen*), University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 26.
16 Ibid., p. 27.
17 See Beck, *Risk Society*, p. 137.
18 See *USA Today*, 11 June 2002, particularly 'Al-Qaeda operative tipped off plot', 'US: dirty bomb plot foiled' and 'Dirty bomb plot: "The future is here, I'm afraid"'.
19 Sidney Blumenthal, 'Bush's war on professionals', Salon.com, 5 Jan. 2006, at www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2006/01/05/spying/index.html?x.
20 Bob Herbert, 'America the fearful', *New York Times*, 15 May 2006, p. 25.
21 Henry A. Giroux, 'Beyond the biopolitics of disposability: rethinking neoliberalism in the new gilded age', *Social Identities* 14(5) (Sept. 2008), pp. 587–620.
22 McNeil, 'Politicians pander to fear of crime', as cited above.
23 See Walter Benjamin, 'On the concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2003, vol. 4.

24 See Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003; here quoted from the English translation by Kevin Attell, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 2–4.

Chapter 9   A natural history of evil

1   Here quoted from Frederick Davies's English translation, *The Gods Will Have Blood*, Penguin Classics, 1979.
2   See Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher, Faber & Faber, 2007, pp. 92, 123, 110.
3   See Émile Cioran, *Précis de decomposition*, Gallimard, 1949.
4   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antrichrist*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 4.
5   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1979, p. 97.
6   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 2003, p. 204.
7   The subtitle of Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect*, Rider, 2009.
8   Littell, *The Kindly Ones*. The original French title of *Les Bienveillantes*, and the title of the German translation, *Die Wohlgesinnten*, seem to convey the intended interpretation better than the English translation. A title such as 'The Well-wishers', or better still 'The Benevolent', would be much more faithful to the original intention.
9   To paraphrase Brecht: 'First a guzzle, morality later'.
10 See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Deutsch, 1986, p. 338.
11 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Viking, 1964, p. 35.
12 Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, pp. 569–70.
13 Ibid., p. 565.
14 John Steiner, 'The SS yesterday and today: a sociopsychological view', in Joel E. Dinsdale (ed.), *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators*, Hemisphere, 1980, p. 431.
15 See Craig Haney, Curtis Banks and Philip Zimbardo, 'Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison', *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, 1973, pp. 69–97.
16 For full discussion, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity, 1989, ch. 6.
17 See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Penguin, 2001.
18 W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell, Hamish Hamilton, 2003.

19   Ibid., p. 65.
20   Ibid., p. 18.
21   See Günther Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne* (1964, 1988), here translated from the French edition, *Nous, fils d'Eichmann*, Rivages, 2003, p. 47.
22   See Hermann Knell, *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II*, Da Capo Press, 2003, particularly pp. 25 and 330–1.
23   Enzo Traverso, *La Violence nazie. Une généalogie européenne*, La Fabrique, 2003.
24   Anders, *Nous, fils d'Eichmann*, p. 108.
25   In Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, here quoted from Michael Hoffmann's translation, *The Wandering Jews*, Granta Books, 2001, p. 125.
26   See Günther Anders, *Wenn ich verzweifelt bin, was geh't mich an?* (1977), here quoted from the French translation, *Et si je suis désespéré, que voulez-vous que j'y fasse?*, Éditions Allia, 2007, pp. 65–6.
27   See Günther Anders, *Der Mann auf der Brucke*, C. H. Beck, 1959, p. 144.
28   See Günther Anders, *Le Temps de la fin*, L'Herne, 2007 (original 1960), pp. 52–3.
29   See Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, C. H. Beck, 1956, here translated from the French edition, *L'Obsolescence de l'Homme. Sur l'âme à l'époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle*, Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2002, pp. 37–40.
30   See Anders, *Et si je suis désespéré*, pp. 67–8.
31   See Anders, *Wenn ich verzweifelt bin*, p. 100.
32   Ibid., p. 92.

Chapter 10   *Wir arme Leut'* . . .

This chapter was first published in German as an essay in the booklet accompanying the Bavarian State Opera's 2008–9 production of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*.

1   Polly Toynbee and David Walker, 'Meet the rich', *Guardian*, 4 Aug. 2008.
2   See Dennis Smith, *Globalization: The Hidden Agenda*, Polity, 2006, p. 38.
3   Ibid., p. 37.

Chapter 11   Sociology: whence and whither?

This chapter is based on a background paper prepared for acceptance of the Distinguished Contribution to Sociological Theory Award of the International Studies Association at the Seventeenth ISA World Congress of Sociology held in Gothenburg in July 2010.