

Violence in the Blind Spot

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Long-term acts of violence against very poor population groups are occasionally reported in newspapers. They are the culmination of everyday acts of violence against the poor, and are more serious than often acknowledged.

In the recent *Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme poverty*¹, Leandro Despouy writes, « Extreme poverty involves the denial, not of a single right or a category of rights, but of human rights as a whole. [...It] is a violation not only of economic and social rights as is generally assumed from an economic standpoint, but also, and to an equal degree, of civil, political and cultural rights... » The effect on the lives of those stricken by extreme poverty « has a precise and clearly defined name in standard legal terminology: absolute denial of the most fundamental human rights. » Later in the report, Mr. Despouy compares extreme poverty to a form of social apartheid. « Any objective discussion must, however, start with an admission - the poor are a sector of the population we know nothing about; worse, we do not know how little we know. If we are forced to it, we have to acknowledge how hard we have tried not to know » (p. 35-38).

The five facts I am about to highlight will amply illustrate this assertion. They are not new revelations, since they have already been reported by reputed journalists or researchers whose facts have been verified. However, their juxtaposition forces us to question our own unbelievable lack of awareness concerning violations of the most basic human rights in our own countries. Is this collective blindness the result of involuntary or deliberate ignorance? Is it blindness or camouflage? Examining the facts should lead to a better understanding.

« Gentle Extermination » of the Mentally III in Psychiatric Hospitals in France

In 1981, Max Lafont, a medical student in Lyon, chose the excessive mortality in French hospitals under the Vichy government as the subject of his thesis. After examining voluminous archives, he established that between 1940 and 1944, forty thousand patients in these institutions died of hunger and cold with the active complicity of medical professionals. Not a word was said about it! The testimonies gathered are overwhelming² In the Vinatier Hospital in Lyon, 2000 of the 2890 patients perished over a four-year period in a like manner: « The patients ate all the grass, dandelions, clover [...] they could pull from between the paving stones in the courtyard. [...] They ate their faecal matter or drank their urine; they lived like animals and, more often than not, had straw instead of bedding »³. When the minimum daily requirement for survival is 2500 to 3000 calories, why were the patients permitted only 400 calories ? Without doubt, it is

¹ United Nations document: E/CN.4Sub.2/1996/13, 28 June 1996.

² Max Lafont, « L'extermination douce », published by Editions de l'AREFPI, 1987, 256 pages.

³ Article in *Le Monde*, 10 June 1987, France.

because of their « sub-human » status of « social non-value » at the time. During this era, the agricultural branch of the hospital was selling its pigs, ca Ives and chickens on the market. The medical profession, regarding the patients as excellent subjects for scientific experimentation, wrote theses and articles on the mechanisms of hunger, oedema, under-nourishment and « the exacerbated appetite of the deranged »

All available statistical data show that patients in French hospices were largely recruited from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds⁴ In 1980, psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, leader of an Italian movement against the institutionalisation of the mentally ill, affirmed, « We have never said that mental illness does not exist. However, we maintain that among those treated as mentally ill, there are a few sick people in irreversible situations, and an enormous number who are mentally healthy and whose only fault is being poor and forgotten »⁵

What happened elsewhere in Europe ? Beginning in 1939, Hitler's Germany organised the systematic extermination of patients in psychiatric hospitals and others of « no social value ». Two hundred thousand people were thus executed. The security police had a mobile gas chamber at its disposal which contributed to the extermination of 61,000 mental patients in Poland and Prussia. Approximately 65,000 elderly persons, most snatched from their homes, were eliminated under Operation T 4. « And I declare on my honour that all the German doctors in the psychiatric clinics knew about it in 1941 », stated Dr. Lang in his report to the International Commission for War Crimes⁶. The Bishop of Muenster had broken this conspiracy of silence in August 1941 when he violently protested against « the awful ideology which justifies the extermination of innocent people and permits the murder of an invalid incapable of working, the infirm, the incurable, the aged. [...] Woe to the German people »

Forced Sterilisation in Sweden

In 1986, two Swedish journalists, with access to the confidential files of the Commission for Social Psychiatry, revealed that a 1941 law allowed Swedish doctors to sterilise 13,000 people against their will for the purpose of social and even racial hygiene !⁷. The government commissioned the University of Uppsala's Institute of Racial Biology to study the causes and hereditary factors of criminality, alcoholism and mental illness, as well as vices and perversities. This study led the Institute to recommend the 1941 law - passed with virtually no debate - which permitted practitioners a wide-berth for interpretation. A 17 year-old girl was sterilised in this way in 1953 because she was thought to be « coquettish, credulous, simpering and easily led ». It was considered in society's interest that she not bear children. In 1955, an adolescent boy of the same age underwent a vasectomy because he was judged to be « deceitful, dishonest and therefore anti-social. » Others were sterilised because their mothers or fathers were believed to be « mentally deficient »

At the beginning of the 1970s, Karl Grunewald, former member of the Swedish Directorate of Social Affairs, denounced these abuses and called for an end to sterilisation conducted without consent. This law was not passed until 1975. The government did not intend to open an inquiry into this affair. However, since 1982 several cases have been brought to court protesting sterilisation procedures practised at the end of the 1960s.

Such practices were also found in Hitler's Germany which, through a law of July 1933, decreed the sterilisation of persons damaged by mental weakness, madness, blindness, deafness and alcoholism. In 1935, new laws extended these measures, particularly toward Jews and Gypsies, by banning marriage between persons of « different races ». In 1950, thirty-three nations,

⁴ Xavier Godinot, « Les travailleurs sous-prolétaires en France » (Sub-proletarian workers in France), doctoral thesis in labour economics, Université de Paris I, 1980, page 71.

⁵ Articles in *Le Monde*, 31 August and 1 September 1980, France.

⁶ Claire Ambroselli, *L'éthique médicale* (Medical Ethics), published in the « Que sais-je » collection, PUF, 1994, page 73.

⁷ Article in *Le Monde*, 19 November 1986, France.

including Norway and the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland, still legislated eugenics in ways believed to prevent the degeneration of populations.

Cultural Genocide of Migrants in Switzerland

« It took me twenty years to accept the idea of talking to journalists, » explains Mariella Mehr to journalist Hans Caprez. « There were things that happened to me which I never spoke about. I cannot, I would vomit »⁸. She was Yeniche, a Rhineland gypsy tribe. Like her mother and her children, she was raised by the Pro Juventute Association. She had been battered, shut in psychiatric institutions, raped, subjected to electric shock treatment, and jailed. Her testimony and the journalist's inquiries reveal the unfathomable history of a whole population group persecuted over decades by Pro Juventute and the Swiss authorities⁹

Pro Juventute, a foundation recognised in Switzerland for public service, was created in 1912 to fight infant mortality. In 1926, it created Good Works for Children of the Open Road, a program targeted at children of migrant communities. In the presence of the police, Good Works removed Yeniche children from their families in order to integrate them into sedentary life. From the first activity report of Good Works, Pro Juventute and its zealot, Dr. Alfred Siegfried, clearly announced their intentions: « All attempts at reforming the conditions of the profoundly abnormal life of these people have failed. [...] In order to do away with the scourge of roaming [...] and to effectively fight nomadism, it is necessary to break-up the family unit ». Long after 1945, Alfred Siegfried continued to support his thesis by referring to R. Ritter, one of the theoreticians of racial cleansing under the Third Reich¹⁰

The children thus taken from their parents were separated and placed in an institution or a foster family. Everything possible was done to permanently sever the links with their family, including changing the children's names, interfering with mail delivery, and threatening the parents. Very quickly, the children were considered « disobedient, insolent, lazy, stupid ». If they tried to run away, they were put in the harshest institutions, then later in penitentiaries, and finally in psychiatric hospitals. Many of them were raped. Many were sterilised for "reasons of eugenics." During Nazi rule, flight from these treatments led many of these children toward French-speaking Switzerland or to Alsace, where they fell into the hands of the Nazis and were deported to concentration camps.

Between 1926 and 1973, at least 619 children were taken from their families by Pro Juventute. We should add to this number the children taken by the Swiss Cantonal offices, but for whom we have found no records. These revelations led Pro Juventute to terminate their Good Works program in 1973. Two years later, the Yeniche people formed the association *Radgenosseenschaft der Landstrasse* and hired lawyers to defend their interests. As their children were taken away by the thousands, they were convinced that the general public was indifferent. They sought public apologies, reparations for the cruelties committed against them, and access to Pro Juventute's archives which contain the individual and collective story of their familial dismantling, as well as the traces of relatives whom they hoped to find. Their undertaking was difficult, strewn with obstacles, and strenuously opposed, but it did bear fruit. In 1986, before the National Assembly, on behalf of the country, the president of Switzerland apologised to the Yeniche people for having financed Good Works. In November 1990, an initial sum of 3.5 million Swiss francs was awarded to the victims. In September 1994, the Federal Council decided to create a foundation to improve the situation of migrant peoples and travellers¹¹

Poor Children and Orphan Deported from Great Britain

In 1986, Margaret Humphreys, an employee of the municipality of Nottingham, received a letter written by an Englishwoman claiming to have been sent alone to Australia at the age of four. She

⁸ Mariella Mehr narrated her story in the book *Steinzeit*, published by Zytglogge, 1985.

⁹ Article in *L'Hebdo*, 22 May 1986, Switzerland.

¹⁰ Article in *Tages Anzeiger*, 30 November 1990, page 2, Switzerland.

¹¹ Article in *Basler Zeitung*, 23 September 1994.

begged for help in finding her parents. Intrigued, Margaret Humphreys began an investigation. The newspaper *The Observer* soon took over the investigation and brought to light a reality that the government and churches were doing their utmost to hide¹². With the support of the Protestant and Catholic churches and some of the most important British charities, thousands of British children were deported by boat to different countries in the Commonwealth in order to « repopulate and revitalise » the Empire¹³. The Ministry of Health acknowledged these facts but did not envisage official compensation for the victims, arguing that it could not be held responsible for deeds dating back several decades.

The director of Barnados, the principal children's charity in the United Kingdom, estimates that since 1850, when the settlement policy was launched, approximately 150,000 children born in Great Britain were sent to one of the countries in the British Empire, typically Australia and Canada, but also New Zealand, the former Rhodesia and South Africa. This forced emigration policy continued until 1967. It involved official cooperation programs with those governing the host countries. The children uprooted in this manner were « for the most part poor children », explained the director of Barnados, « children whose parents were incapable of assuring subsistence, or orphans ». The Salvation Army describes « young adults... It is necessary to understand that many of the women were involved in prostitution and that the men often died from alcoholism ». The government and the associations involved thought they were « offering a new start to these children », given their bleak prospects in their native country. Certain children were reduced to slavery or endured physical brutality and sexual abuse. The worst abuses seem to have been inflicted in four orphanages run by the Christian Brothers in Australia. These orphanages were closed in 1983 when the congregation's leadership made an official apology to the victims.

In order to find the missing and to re-establish family ties, Margaret Humphreys created the Child Migrant Trust which received thousands of requests for information after a film about these events was shown in Australia.

Lifetime Internment in Irish Asylums.

When the last Victorian laundry in Dublin closed in October 1996, the public learned that 40 elderly women, 60 to 80 years of age, had nowhere to go¹⁴. Referred to as « the Magdalene Women », they had spent their lives in a convent, in the Mary Magdalene Asylum, between steam presses and religious services, because they had been pregnant out-of-wedlock when they were teenagers. These pregnancies were sometimes the result of incest.

Philomena Collins and her sister had been placed in an orphanage in the Dublin suburbs after their mother's death. At age 14, Philomena was then sent to this convent in 1946. « I never again heard news of my sister, nor of any member of my family ». The girls began their day at 6 : 30 a.m. eating silently in the dining room. They were strictly forbidden to talk about the babies, which were taken from them. The Reverend Mother of the convent admitted that, « The women should receive apologies for what was done to them »

Today, the majority of these women continue to live in the convent and package laundry. Many will leave only for their burial. In the north of Dublin, where 132 « Magdalene Women » are buried, their existence is recorded on the register as follows: plot 114, unknown; plot 119, unknown; etc. That is the only official record that the state has kept of these women subjected to lifelong seclusion.

Devastation Caused by Purification and Eugenics in the West

All these facts have deep historic roots. The policies of interning the poor were developed in 17th and 18th century Europe. They took form in the work houses in England and the United

¹² Margaret Humphreys, *Lost Children of the Empire*, Harper and Collins, 1987

¹³ Articles in *Le Monde*, 18 and 19 July 1993 and 8 November 1993.

¹⁴ Article in *Courrier international*, 21 November 1996, cited in a press review on European current events concerning poverty and human rights, printed in French only by ATD Fourth World, Pierrelaye, Nov.-Dec., 1996.

Provinces (now the Netherlands), and in the general hospitals and alms houses in France¹⁵. Beginning in 1719, a French ruling led to the deportation of vagrants to the colonies for forced labour. Although the law was revoked several years later, young women locked up in general hospitals continued to be regularly deported to populate Canada and Louisiana¹⁶.

The notion of « pauperism », the extreme poverty of the masses which is chronic, permanent and inherited, emerged in England in 1820. Between 1830 and 1840, the poorest people became entrenched in misery, and feared by others. The dominant bourgeoisie saw the working classes as dangerous. A public health trend developed to "improve, moralise and cleanse" the working classes. People spoke of heredity, of an enduring race which bequeaths tendencies toward crime and alcoholism to its children. Beginning in 1850, numerous institutions for delinquent children developed and took children away from parents « beyond redemption »¹⁷

This was the origin of the notion of racial purification. The term « eugenics », which has permeated the Western mind for more than a century, developed gradually. The term was first used in 1883 and designates « the science for the betterment of lineage which [...] particularly in the case of man, deals with all the influences which could possibly bestow on the most gifted races a greater number of chances to prevail against less fit races »¹⁸

From 1890 to 1920, eugenics societies and journals were created by doctors and biologists in Germany, Norway, Great Britain and the United States. They gave the scholarly and social foundation for sterilisation and euthanasia legislation throughout the world¹⁹. In 1895, two German works, *Right to Die* and *The Fundamentals of Racial Hygiene* affirmed that the value of life can not only be null but also negative. In 1912, the French Eugenics Society was founded. In that year Charles Richet, who later won the 1913 Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology, wrote in his work *Human Selection*, « After the elimination of inferior races, the first step toward selection is the elimination of the abnormal... I prefer healthy children to tainted children, and I do not see any social need to preserve these defective children »

In 1920, two Germans, a jurist and a psychiatrist, published *Ending Lives Not Worth Living*, a book which served for a decade as a reference in medical debates. Still in 1920, eighteen American states created sterilisation legislation which all targeted the same population: the feeble-minded, epileptics, sexual perverts, certain criminals, and those suffering hereditary forms of certain illnesses. Through the impetus of doctors and biologists, Western culture thus determined thresholds of humanity which became thresholds for elimination and annihilation. Nazi eugenics, racist and sterilising, was simply an example of the orthodox doctrine of the 1920s taken seriously by a totalitarian power. There is nothing in German eugenics which cannot be found in the works of renowned American eugenicists, terrified that the debilitated and people of colour were overrunning the country.

Is there any country in modern Europe where children are no longer taken from their parents, or where women are not sterilised or forced to abort because of their oppressive extreme poverty ?

Crimes Against Humanity ?

Europe remains the stage for war-related atrocities: massacres and systematic rape perpetrated under the orders of war leaders in the former Yugoslavia; or civil massacres in the Ukraine. These are among the tragic examples. Such deeds hark back to the notion of « crimes against humanity » which the international military tribunal, set up on 8 August 1945 to judge the great criminals of the Nazi war, defined as follows: « assassination, extermination, subjugation to slavery, deportation and all other inhuman acts committed against all civil populations before or during the war, or persecutions for political, racial or religious motives »²⁰.

¹⁵ Bronislaw Geremek, *La potence et la pitié, l'Europe et les pauvres du Moyen Age à nos jours*, Gallimard, 1987

¹⁶ Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, Fayard, 1995, page 95.

¹⁷ Michèle Perrot, « Le sous-prolétariat et les classes dangereuses », *Revue Quart Monde*, third trimester 1979.

¹⁸ Claire Ambroselli, opus. cit., p.39.

¹⁹ Ibid., opus.cit., p.39 and following.

²⁰ Ibid, opus.cit., p.89.

Should we consider the five acts highlighted above as crimes against humanity? When human rights violations are organised or hidden by the state, are we not confronted with state control against common law for which the notion of crimes against humanity is specifically adapted?²¹ As the former president of the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights in France suggested, should we institute proceedings in the European Court of Human Rights in order to condemn states for inhumane and degrading treatment?²² It is up to citizens and legal specialists to decide. We cannot be but scandalised by the convergence of silence on the part of institutions, ineffectiveness on the part of justice, and collaboration on the part of medical authorities.

The Process of Delusion and Concealment

How is it possible that, in our democracies, massive and on-going violations of human rights remain invisible for several decades? What would be revealed by a systematic study of the archives of the psychiatric services or the health care services for children and adolescents in Europe from 1920 to 1970? How did lay and religious institutions, created to come to the aid of the populations which suffered the most, sometimes become downright torturers of these populations? What diabolical alchemy provoked such delusion and perversion of ideals and values?

The violence committed against the poor by individuals and states is not new. It has always co-existed with pity and feeds itself on secular fear of populations considered as threats to order, security, health and public finances. Bronislaw Geremek illustrated how, at the dawn of the modern age, « few people manifested their revolt against politics which preferred the gallows and prison to charity »²³. Therefore, it is hardly astonishing that individuals, institutions or states, none of whom had fully understood the rupture with the past introduced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (signed in 1948), perpetuated conduct that had been considered normal for centuries, such as internment, deporting and condemning to death the poor.

The values our society lays claim to are incompatible with the extreme violence inflicted on the poor. This violence will continue if it remains hidden, and if the populations who endure it are not recognised as poor but are weighted down with insulting epithets. The process of simultaneously concealing this violence, and hiding the populations subjected to it, occurs in three steps.

The first step is the development of an ideology of **disqualification**. The fear of disorder, insecurity, epidemics and crime crystallises in the populations most distant from the established norms. Thus, they seem to put the social contract at stake. These people are considered invalids, demonised and devalued in a peremptory fashion. They are characterised as useless or harmful. Science and religion sometimes support or rationalise these attitudes. Through the radical inferiority conferred upon them, these scapegoats are considered to be sub-human, the refuse of humanity, without rights. Slavery and apartheid were justified in this way. This is how our societies looked at vagabonds prior to the industrial revolution, and the « wretched » in the nineteenth century, paving the way to a « bloodthirsty law »²⁴ comprised of banishment, capital punishment, internment and forced labour.

The second step is **disaffiliation**. It is in this way that Robert Castel describes the process by which disqualified individuals are rejected because of their lack of participation in all productive activity, their isolation from relationships, and their place on the margins of society²⁵ (25). But « to disaffiliate » is also to separate children from their parents, to destroy the family unit, or to prevent it from forming in order to break down the solidarities which it creates. In this sense,

²¹ Ibid., opus.cit., p.86.

²² Paul Bouchet, « Les causes significatives et la référence aux droits de l'homme, » Dossiers et documents de la Revue Quart Monde n° 6, p.75.

²³ Bronislaw Geremek, *La potence et la pitié*, Gallimard, 1987, p.317

²⁴ Robert Castel, opus.cit., p.90-108

²⁵ Ibid., opus.cit. p.35 and following.

taking custody of children, and deliberately destroying their relationship with their parents by shutting them into homes, asylums, hospices and prisons, are radical forms of disaffiliation. These considerably weaken the already weakened victims and place them in a position of vulnerability and extreme dependence, easy prey for economic or sexual exploitation in both wealthy and poor countries.

The third step is **elimination**, whether it is done by extermination, sterilisation, cultural genocide or deportation. The war against poverty turned itself into a merciless war against the poor, with the complicity and collaboration of institutions and many citizens because this relieves their own fears. The violence is buried under a veil of silence and lies of which one pretends to be unaware. Or rather, of which one would prefer to be unaware for still longer, for when the truth is bared in broad daylight, a widespread web of complicities and cowardices is revealed.

To counter the lies and the silence, we must promote the truth by giving credibility to the words of those whom no one wants to believe. To counter the disqualification, we must affirm the inalienable, fundamental value of all human beings, as well as the poorest people's abilities and their resistance to extreme poverty. To counter the disaffiliation, we must maintain and reinforce solidarity, especially family relationships. To counter the elimination, we must promote partnership with the most rejected populations. It is in this way that human rights will be promoted.