

A TALE OF TWO WARS

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If in the Sixties the blame for any aberrant human behaviour was merrily pinned on society, nowadays our approach to the problem is definitely more scientific: the wicked is DNA. In 2003, a Dr Evan S. Deneris, associate professor of Neurosciences at Case Western Reserve University of Cleveland (Ohio), found the gene of aggressiveness and anxiety and, therefore, as a consequence, of war. If it is so, war is inevitable because it is written inwardly, and, if we carry it with us, trying to get rid of it is wasted effort. But, besides genetics, justifications for a brawl can be found galore, from political ideals to religious claims, from standings drawn up according to ethnos down to presumed territorial rights. The only limit is imagination. In addition to that, without us being willing to confess it because that would debase the nobleness of our martial purpose, deep down there could be a much greater design of which we are nothing more than unaware characters: restraint of numbers. When animals belonging to the same species and, so, with the same needs, are sharing too small territories, the only possibility they have left is getting rid of the competitor. Is Nature cruel? It's up to you to judge. In any case, Nature does not stay within the bounds of any moral judgment: we must accept it because there is no other possible option. But if we carry war written in all our cells and, therefore, war is a peculiarity of our species, perhaps we had better not go too far and take a quick look at the risks such an activity implies, beyond the sheer, simple and obvious killing our fellow occasionally transformed into an enemy. Just as a cue for some reflections, let's take Gulf War I, that of 1991. When their stint is over, some soldiers are repatriated from Iraq or Kuwait and bring back home funny symptoms or, better, funny collections of symptoms never reported in books; symptoms, however, to all appearances, not mutually related. That things annoys the upper military spheres, not for the invalids as such: after all, it's only soldiers and, if a soldier dies, there is nothing strange or unusual. What is vexing is the possible impact such a thing could have on people who, with their taxes, pay for the costs of war and whose consent or, in any case, not dissent, is indispensable. So, according to a long-established praxis, the decision is taken to deny facts in spite of their being evident, and that also with the connivance of obliging media and accommodating academicians. Some fifteen years or a bit longer elapse, in the Persian Gulf another war is fought, another one is fought in what used to be Yugoslavia and the number of those who fall ill with those strange illnesses increases. And it's not only soldiers: there is a lot of civilians as well and, a bothersome and embarrassing occurrence, among them there are also children. Many. Some of them have not yet been born but those who manage to be show more or less horrid malformations, some of them incompatible with life. So, what if, by chance, a "dark" side of war existed? And, considering that those who are taken ill are not only the "wicked" but the "good", our side, as well, couldn't there be something in war to which sides make no difference? Rather often, because of my profession, I meet soldiers and, with the aid of a somewhat particular electron microscope, I look into their pathological tissues. One of those soldiers is Herbert Reed, an American, whose story can be read at <http://thirdestatesundayreview.blogspot.com/2006/08/herbert-reed-blood-in-his-urine-and.html>. With him I met two of his comrades-in-arms, ill as well, and the stories overlap with incessant repetitiveness for them, for the Americans, for the French, for the British, for the Italians I keep meeting personally or for those whose vicissitudes are told to me by their parents or spouses because they can't do that any more. Well, let's go back to Herbie Reed. Already in Iraq he feels bad and asks to be seen by a doctor: it's nothing. He comes back home and feels worse: a long list of symptoms including chronic fatigue, urination problems, insomnia, excruciating pains all over the body and very severe breathing problems. They send him to a military hospital from where he is discharged without a diagnosis but with a bunch of documents ruling out any possibility that his symptoms, be they real or fake, have to do with war. Yet, symptoms are there: I saw him myself take pain killers and travel dragging a case containing a respirator without which he could not live. And if there is an effect, there must necessarily be a cause, but this concept, apparently so trivial, has been put on one side as, if we must trust our eyes, has thinking brain. In any case, Herbie is assigned to other activities hoping that, actually not being able to work, he resigns and gets out of

the way, and maybe goes to die elsewhere, not in the rank of the Army and, therefore, out of any statistics.

Let's look at the facts objectively: from their point of view, military authorities are perfectly right. The only risk war should imply is being injured or, perhaps, even killed on duty by a bomb or a bullet (friendly fire is allowed), and if, for any reason, all that is particularly loud, here is an excellent chance for a nice funeral with the coffin covered by a flag that is then folded up in a careful, perhaps even somewhat maniacal way, and given to the relatives. But those soldiers who come back without any evident wound and then die in a hospital bed after an embarrassing, sometimes lengthy, agony, stuffed with dubious diagnoses, often issued after long delays, and ineffective therapies, are not provided for: that is not a soldierly way of dieing. Dieing in one's homeland, surrounded by monitors, phleboclysis bottles and bedpans, of a hardly clear disease can't be part of the script, and, if someone spreads the rumour, with pacifists and damages claimed, it is no joke. So, there is no choice but deny, and that despite any evidence.

Has it always been like that? I don't know, but let's see what modern wars are like. The protocol starts with a scientific, surgical bombardment, if I am forgiven the use of those two adjectives, with the support of the latest devices of technology. First of all, all "nerve centres" in the territory must be destroyed, and it is only after having accomplished that task that the troops, generally infantry, set physically foot in those ravaged lands and take possession of it. Everywhere are just "wall shreds" as the Italian poet Ungaretti would have put it, but don't let us be fooled: all the walls become invisible are still there indeed. The bombs fallen crumbled them down to very fine dust, something our eyes can't detect but something that is evident if one has the right instruments available, and alas, something that is even better detected by human tissues and cells which react in an unfriendly way to such undue presence. And that dust, the ghost of what had been buildings, float in the air for a time impossible to guess but, in all cases, very long. In other words, a pollution created in a moment and, perhaps, destined to last forever. Forever because the majority of those dusts can't be degraded either by Nature or by any technology we have at our disposal. It is there that the other war starts, the one fought at a very different level, and that war has its own strict rules, rules impossible to dispute, rules against which science, force or diplomacy are powerless. With our supertechnological bombs we have altered the equilibrium of Nature, polluting air, water, soil, vegetables, animals and men. It goes without saying that men are men whatever clothes or uniforms they wear and, for that reason, it doesn't matter if they are soldiers or civilians or volunteers gone to land a hand. But if soldiers have some means to protect themselves: gas masks and Geiger counters, for example, civilians are the enemies and, therefore, are to be killed because of the logic itself of war, volunteers are, in a way, transparent. They don't belong to any specific nation or to any side and, so, they can't be classified either as friends or as enemies, and, if we look at facts, they are in the way, since they see things and don't keep their mouth closed. They go there, eat what people eat, drink the same water, breathe the same air, and are hardly ever informed of the real risks they run. I met them: they look at you astonished at their disease, as if their burst of generosity should necessarily make them immune from everything. Yet, it's not so. Nature has no moral rules or, at least, not those we should expect or like. If we alter her equilibrium, Nature resumes immediately another without caring if that novel equilibrium is or is not compatible with the needs of one or another species. And, obviously, Man (how pathetically ridiculous looks that capital letter!) does not enjoy any privilege and can easily be transformed, from the Lord of Creation as he, with naïve conceit loves to call himself, to the weakest and most fragile of creatures.

No tool is good or evil in itself, but everything depends on the use one makes of it and the brain is no different. The wise uses it at its best, something that usually coincides with everybody's good. If politicians, soldiers and, why not?, common people wished to dwell for a minute upon that self-evidence, perhaps the whole human species would gain some advantage, not least an economical one. As a matter of fact, trying to clean areas polluted by war implies extravagant costs with results that can't be defined but poor when not altogether inexistent. I wrote that above: in most cases, inorganic particles created by modern bombings are eternal and so small to escape any possibility of capture. Moreover, now we are perfectly aware that those particles bring about an endless number of pathologies, many of which incurable by today's medicine. So, what can we do?

In the Fifties, the nuclear waste from a hospital were buried an American town. Then, in the area a beautiful park was built, where children went and play; Unfortunately, a long time after, the frequent

callers of the park started to report pathologies that showed that that area was contaminated and it would have been so for a very long time: in fact, in terms of human generations, forever. In a not dissimilar way, when a firing ground has exceeded a certain level of pollution, the area is given to the community as a present, without, though, being too fastidious about the risk implicit in all that. What happens is that the hot potato is passed on to other hands, happy at such generosity. Now a fact is incontrovertible: in the last, very few, years we have polluted our planet more than we did in the former couple of million years, so exceeding any possible sustainability and in certain territories modern wars are the major responsible for that problem. What shall we do, then? And what if, not being able to solve our problems with the aid of reason, we did that the way Horatii and Curiatii did?

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