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Ungrievable Lives
Global Terror and the Media

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I lived firsthand the attacks of September 11, 2001, from the 11th floor of my apartment on the Upper East Side, in Manhattan. However, I learned what was happening only a few miles away through a phone call from Rome, while wondering why I was hearing so many sirens howling on the street. As I was agonizing about the safety of my two children, stranded in their schools at the opposite ends of town, I was watching the Twin Towers collapse on TV and speaking to a terrified friend in Brussels who had called me on my mobile. On that day, original and copy, event and representation were literally indistinguishable. Since that day, the global media – the complex communicative network without either center or periphery, unregulated by laws and unmarked by boundaries – shrunk the planet, by transforming "the local event simultaneously into a global one and the whole world population into a benumbed witness" (Borradori, 2003, p. 28) These words, spoken by philosopher Jürgen Habermas a few weeks after the attacks, announce that September 11, 2001 inaugurated not only a set of brand new questions at the geopolitical level, but also important and permanent modifications in the structure of perception and experience of the world population at large.

Luckily, it took only a day for the major television channels to realize that repeating over and over again the scenes of the two planes penetrating the Twin Towers had a traumatizing effect on both viewers worldwide and the relatives of the victims. The endless reiteration of the same horrific images intensified anxiety in viewers from Chile to Norway, and made the very real tragedy of families from New Jersey to the Bronx into an obscene spectacle. By contrast, as it was predictable, it took years for journalists, political scientists, media theorists, and philosophers like me to come to grips with the kind of untamable beast terrorism is, due to its slippery meaning and the immense and unique ethical challenge it poses to whoever studies it, writes on it, reports on it or films it: for the internal logic of a terrorist

attack in the age of the global media is such that informing the world audience of the events on the ground cannot be done without divulging and aggrandizing them, thereby contributing to the fulfillment of the attack's psychological, political, financial, and military objectives.

In this essay, I will start by examining the difficulties concerning the very definition of terrorism and then turn to its encounter with the pervasive network of the global media. In particular, I will analyze the impact of terrorism on the global media in terms of the biopolitical figure of autoimmunity, first used by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to describe the fine line that separates information on from support of terrorist attacks. Biologically, the immune system is a network of organs, cells, and molecules that work together to defend the body against aggression by foreign invaders such as bacteria and viruses. I propose to read the global media as part of the immune system of the democratic body politic, whose survival depends on free and informed participation in the public sphere. Since the collapse of the Twin Towers, terrorism has occupied a prominent position on the world stage at the level of geopolitics but also at the level of the media's operation and self-conception. The impact of terrorism on the global media looks like an autoimmune response because the media cannot but disseminate, and consequently augment, terrorism's terrifying effect. Once terror as an emotion migrates into the political sphere it opens the way to rigid polarizations and the undercutting of civic freedoms. Such autoimmune response destroys the pluralism of the democratic body politic and does so by colonizing the public arena with images and narratives of destruction and dehumanization. These images and narratives by themselves invite us to apprehend the other according to the complementary schemes of victimization and demonization. Such an extreme degree of polarization produces a numbing of perception and affect that allows viewing of the other as not fully real, or human, precisely because it is either demonized or victimized. Following Judith Butler's (2009) idea that others appear to us as truly living only if their lives are framed as vulnerable, or at the risk of being lost, and thus grieved, I will claim that the only way the media can control its own replication of terror is by embracing a hyperbolic ethics that privileges responsiveness to the vulnerability of the other over normative principles, rights, and duties. Embracing such an ethics means to accept as a fundamental obligation the dismantling of any proclaimed "we" or "them." Anyone reporting, writing, filming, posting world events, whether officially for a news organization or by taking photos from their own cell phone, should elect as their founding obligation to question the unity and cohesion of any collective actor. Reporting seems to have forgotten, and let its public forget, that a group, a nation, or a culture is not only delimited by other groups, but also internally differentiated in factions and subgroups, and even more deeply, in interdependent, unique individuals. If what Butler (2009) calls the "precariousness" of individual lives is brought into focus, along with the range of material and discursive conditions that are needed to sustain even the simplest human existence, a commitment to a more egalitarian distribution of those conditions is likely to emerge, over and beyond any ideological divide.

Boundless Terror

The difficulty in dealing with the concept of terrorism starts from a simple and disconcerting realization: in spite of the fact that it has been and still is used as a self-evident term, "terrorism" does not designate a specific type of action or event. This makes it an elusive, confusing, and dangerous term.

A symptom of the fogginess that surrounds the concept of terrorism is the anarchy with which names are attributed to the various events associated with it: September 11, 2001, or 9/11; and March 11, 2004 (the train bombings in Madrid, Spain), go by date. However, the marking of dates varies according to national or regional conventions. As a consequence, some terrorist attacks have several names: For example March 11, 2004 is also known as 11/3, 3/11, M-11, and 11-M. Some other terrorist attacks go instead by the name of their targets as in the attack against the USS Cole that occurred on October 17, 2000 in the harbor of Aden, Yemen. Other attacks go by their location, like the Oklahoma City Bombing and there are some that do not have a "proper" name at all, as in the case of the suicide missions carried out by Islamic extremist groups and factions against ordinary Muslims in countries like Iraq and Pakistan.

The confusion that reigns at the level of individual events is puzzling but is only a symptom of a much more serious definitional issue that arises whenever the general categorization is invoked, either as a noun, "terrorism," or as a predicate, "terrorist." Formal documents offer hundreds of definitions of terrorism. The Department of State has one, the Department of Defense has another, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has yet another. However, none is wholly satisfactory, a complaint voiced by many terrorism experts, including Walter Laqueur, an authority on the topic since the 1970s, who concluded that the only features common to all available definitions is that terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence. Laqueur's laconic conclusion is still unfortunately the current situation even though, since 2001, the United States Code has expanded its section dedicated to terrorism considerably. The Code's priority, however, is clearly to spell out the kinds of offenses a crime of terrorism entails as well as various jurisdictional issues. As a consequence, there is nothing in it that clarifies any of the political and conceptual ambiguities haunting the term.

The first ambiguity concerns the alleged political nature of terrorism, which is usually left to the public declarations in which a given group "claims responsibility" for a given attack usually providing a sketch of its ideological justifications. The media and the political establishment validate the legitimacy of the practice by restricting their attention to the authenticity or inauthenticity of these declarations. It is not at all clear to me that the political content of terrorism should in fact be determined through this sort of pronouncement. Given the elusive meaning of the term, violent actions for which vague claims of responsibility are issued could conceivably be classified and prosecuted as criminal activity. To gather the degree of confusion surrounding the use of the term "terrorism" let us look at the following

case. In August 2002, *The New York Times* reported a study conducted by the World Markets Research, a centre of economic intelligence based in London, which worked out a world ranking of countries at risk of terrorist attacks. It gave Colombia the first place and the United States the fifth. In this case just like innumerable other ones, the label "terrorism" covered over abysmal differences in context. Colombia's tumultuous political front, copiously fraught with assassinations, is complex and fragmented: drug-lord mercenary armies fight alongside paramilitary private groups, hired by land-owners, against the historical so called terrorists (the members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), the police force, and the official army. How can this splintered play of forces, deeply entrenched in contradictions specific to Latin American modern history, be so easily assimilated to the attacks of 9/11, or the suicide bombers on the Tube in London? Similarly, where is the common ground between international terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda and domestic terrorist groups or individuals in the United States? Interestingly, this parallel is seldom drawn, if at all.

Habermas' solution to this problem is to reconstruct the political content of terrorism as a function of the realism of its goals. In this perspective, terrorism becomes nothing more than a historical category. Habermas' solution applies very efficiently to the case of national liberation movements that succeed in their scope: these are situations where those who are considered terrorists, and possibly even convicted as terrorists, become, in a sudden turn of events, the new political leaders. Here is a classic example: At the head of the military Zionist faction known as *Irgun*, Menachem Begin, one of the founding fathers of Israel, was the mastermind of the Jewish uprising against the British authorities controlling Palestine, which began in 1944, increased in pace and scope immediately after World War II, and continued until late 1947. Begin ordered many of *Irgun*'s operations, including the famous Acre prison breakout that allowed the liberation of many members of the underground organization, and the bombing of the central British administrative offices in the King David Hotel, which caused the death of 91 people, among which were 15 Jews. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, in 1948, Begin disbanded *Irgun* and became the leader of the parliamentary opposition until 1977.

It would be a mistake to think that a case like Begin's does not have a chance to happen anymore. As recently as November 2009, the world learned that the man who was elected president of Uruguay, José Mujica, was a cofounder of the Tupamaros guerrillas, an armed and very active "terrorist" organization that during the 1960s and 1970s regularly conducted kidnappings, bombings, and armed robberies. While the country was suffering under an oppressive military dictatorship that lasted two decades, Mujica was in prison, enduring torture and solitary confinement; an experience, he declared, that cured him of the belief that armed revolution can achieve lasting social change.

The second level at which the concept of terrorism remains dangerously ambiguous concerns its conceptual coherence. Take one of the official definitions of "terrorist activity," which has been widely adopted by the FBI and the CIA as well as the Departments of State and Defense. The document states that terrorists are

to be considered those "violent acts intended to intimidate or coerce a 'civilian' population or intended to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion" (*United States Code Congressional and Administrative News*, 1984). None of the primitive terms is given any substantive clarification. For example, what counts as "intimidation" of both civilians and governments? If it is true that intimidation is the chief characteristic of an act of terrorism, it is also a major component of military strategy in war. What separates terrorism from war? Has there ever been a war completely free of terrorism, namely, the killing or abuse of civilians for the sake of the intimidation or swaying of their government? Were the carpet bombings of London, at the hand of the Nazis, or of Dresden, Germany, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, at the hands of the allies, acts of war or acts of terrorism? The definition provided by the United States Code does not help to dispel the confusion either. In title 22, Section 2656, terrorism is presented as a "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." What it is that separates civilian and military targets – one of the historical obstacles to the peace process between Israeli and Palestinians? The Code speaks of "subnational groups or clandestine agents" as the sole possible agents of terrorism. On what grounds do we discount the possibility that a legitimate government may commit acts of terrorism? Virtually any authoritarian regime, not to speak of dictatorships, has used terrorism as a means to subdue the opposition. So, if we draw a line between state and nonstate terrorism, are we also to discuss their respective legitimacies according to different parameters? Is there a difference in kind between state and nonstate terrorism? What is one to make of the other distinction between national and international terrorism, upheld after 9/11 as a truism? Once terrorism erupts on the geopolitical scene, it becomes hard to distinguish clearly between institutions such as the army and the police, or even between war and peace, with the result that it is not absurd to wonder whether we are ever really at peace in the presence of the potential occurrence, or recurrence, of a terrorist attack.

For political discourse as a whole the encounter with terrorism equals stepping on a landmine and experiencing the devastating blast – the effects produced by terrorism in the material sphere, where people and objects are physically torn apart by explosive devices, and replicated in the theoretical sphere, where laws and definitions are imploded by the collapse of age old conceptual architectures. What is certain is that terrorism exposes the global system of communication to a new set of responsibilities *vis à vis* both realms.

A Spectral Fight, Not a War

As disturbing as it is to face it, the global media has an unwilling but constitutive role in the production and dissemination of terror. One of the suggestions of this essay is that the figure of autoimmunity may help clarify it; and in so doing, pave

the way for a strategy of containment of its destructive effects. In order to throw light on this crucial point, I will first explain the broad semantic umbrella of the term immunity, which I will recover from its long and singular history. I will then show how Derrida first used autoimmunity to describe the relation between the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the history of the American participation in the Cold War.

The Latin term *immunitas* originates from the legal concept of exemption. In ancient Rome the exemption was meant for individuals who were excused from military service or paying taxes, whereas in the in the Middle Ages it applied to the exemption that the Church's property and personnel enjoyed from civil control. Although the first medical use of the term dates to the fourteenth century, when it indicated being miraculously saved from contagion in the plague epidemic, medical historian Arthur M. Silverstein noticed that its first biological application occurred in the poetry of the Roman Marcus Annaeus Lucanus "to describe the famous resistance to snakebite of the Psylli Tribe of North Africa" (Silverstein, 1989, p. 1). This history of the term makes clear the ambiguity haunting the meaning of immunity, which, very much like the Greek word *pharmakon*, means *both* "cure" and "poison." In fact, this oscillation between cure and poison well describes the role that the global media plays *vis à vis* the democratic body politic. On the one hand, the media is the guarantor for the circulation of information, opinion formation, and its free expression. On the other hand, if it falls prey to the colonization of its space by a hegemonic political agenda, the media becomes the democratic body politic's most destructive poison.

Historically, the term immunity did not earn formal medical currency "until the nineteenth century following the rapid spread of Edward Jenner's smallpox vaccination." (Silverstein, 1989, p. 1) Yet, even after its definitive medical adoption as the heading for a new branch of studies called "immunology," the concept of immunity retained that same semantic fluctuation between the realms of biology and law. On the one hand, the legal meaning survived in expressions such as "diplomatic immunity," "charitable immunity," and "parliamentary immunity;" on the other, as literary scholar W. T. Mitchell writes, "the whole theory of the immune system, and the discipline of immunology, is riddled with images drawn from the socio-political sphere – of invaders and defenders, hosts and parasites, natives and aliens, and of borders and identities that must be maintained" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 917). Before looking carefully at how the cross over between biology and politics evolved to the point of intersecting the phenomenon of terrorism in the post-9/11 phase, I wish to examine more closely the biology of immunity.

Biologically, the first identification of the immune system in its current understanding was carried out by a Persian physician and alchemist in the ninth century AD, Al-Razi, who distinguished between smallpox and measles, and indicated that exposure to these agents conferred a lasting protection against them. However, it was only with the French scientist, Louis Pasteur, in the second half of the nineteenth

century that immunology was born as the study of how various pathogens, including bacteria and viruses, cause disease, and how after an infectious episode the human body or other organisms gain the ability to resist future attacks. From Pasteur on, the immune system has been likened to a sixth sense. Its workings can be compared to a sophisticated set of learning tools, able to distinguish between invading pathogens and the organism's own healthy cells. Since the receptors coordinating this selection are the antibodies, we can say that the immune system's main function is to produce antibodies, which are its most intelligent components. The way antibodies learn is by "mirroring" the invading antigens, binding themselves to them, and killing them.

"Clonal selection" is the theory that explains immunological memory as a two-prong cloning of lymphocytes (the blood cells that are the basic components of the immune system). While one clone actively combats infection, the other remains in the immune system for a longer time, which results in protection, or immunity, to that antigen. The challenge of the immune system is that pathogens can mutate rapidly and produce adaptations able to bypass it. If the antibodies do not keep up either with the aggressiveness of the pathogens or with their mutations, the organism falls prey to an infection. What happens if the whole system of recognition of the host's own cells fails? The immune system turns against itself: it is these misdirected immune responses that are referred to as autoimmunity. Autoimmunity is thus the phenomenon by which an organism attacks its own defenses against foreign invaders.

The figure of autoimmunity renders ambiguous a set of opposites traditionally at the center of political and military discourse: friend and enemy, native and foreign, defense and attack. It is precisely because of this ambiguity that Derrida used it to elucidate the nature of the violence responsible for the collapse of the Twin Towers and a section of the Pentagon. Derrida's argument concerning autoimmunity starts from a double consideration: the aggression came from within the United States and the commando that carried it out was an aberrant product of recent American history. The attacks against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were conducted by a small group of men who, with a ruse, got hold of an American plane, on the grounds of an American airport, and used it to destroy an American building complex, internationally recognized as a symbol of American global financial power and leadership. The notion of the pure foreignness of the attacks that was being promoted by the media and fueled by the Bush Administration literally as they occurred, and that remained uncontested for a long time thereafter, is compromised already at this minimum level. Moreover the commando, insofar as it was part of Al Qaeda, was a late outgrowth of a large group of intelligence and military operatives that had been armed, financed, and trained by the United States in the context of the Cold War. At that time, Washington backed the religiously inspired resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the *mujiahidin*, which included Bin Laden in its ranks. The *mujiadhin* movement, which would evolve into the Taliban regime, was thus part of the United States' own system of defense against the USSR.

Derrida appealed to the figure of autoimmunity to describe what he called a case of double suicide: the commando's "own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal, autoimmunitary aggression – and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed, and trained them" (Borradori, 2003, p. 96). The phenomenon of autoimmunity captures the self-destruction of the terrorist commando as well as their destruction of those to whom they owed their political life: the United States of America. In either case, it legitimately describes an immune response misdirected at the organism's own cells.

The kind of violence that exploded on September 11, 2001 can be illustrated by the phenomenon of autoimmunity in yet another sense: its self-propagating quality. The internal logic of autoimmunity is such that the organism undergoing the phenomenon becomes structurally and indefinitely defenseless because it has lost the protection of its own immune system. Medically, weakening the immune system is often the only option, since in this way its aggressive misfiring is also going to be weakened. Similarly, the threat of an attack aimed at spreading terror, particularly against a mass of ordinary citizens as it was the case in downtown Manhattan and Washington may be over physically but is never really over discursively, symbolically, and psychologically.

A terrorist attack is never over because it is future-oriented: it always promises more than it is able to deliver. As Derrida suggested, "a weapon wounds and leaves forever open an unconscious scar; but this weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future ... traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is "over and done with" (Borradori, 2003, p. 97). As horrific as the events of September 11, 2001 were, if they had been conclusive, there would have been the possibility, after mourning the dead and grieving the losses, to turn the page. However, in Derrida's view, one of the structural features of an act of terrorism is precisely not offering this chance. Any wound, he claims, leaves a scar, and with the scar comes the fear to be wounded again. What is specific to terrorism, however, is that it projects its threat into the future so powerfully that the worst is always and systematically expected as yet to come. "What is put at risk by this *terrifying* immunitary logic is nothing less than the existence of the world," (Borradori, 2003, p. 98) he ominously concluded. In the same way that the organism's life is threatened by a misdirected immune response, the existence of the world itself is threatened by an act aimed at spreading terror, especially in an age in which images of chemical, bacteriological, and nuclear attacks are part and parcel of what terror is about. In fact, the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, proves Derrida's point. Their consequences have been incalculable both at the domestic and international levels. Apart from the problematic response of the Bush Administration to the attacks, any reaction on the part of a state or a continental alliance is fraught with a very high margin of error: there are the risks of overreaction and underreaction, on top of the game of guessing the reliability of data provided mostly by intelligence. The fight against terror is thus a spectral fight, not a war.

Autoimmunity and Weaponization

Derrida's argument insists on the autoimmunitary character of the violence unleashed by the Cold War as the historical context for the emergence of the Afghan religious resistance against the Soviets, which eventually produced clandestine organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, who then turned back against their original lifeline, the United States. In Derrida's footsteps, I propose to turn the figure of autoimmunity to examine the relation between the phenomenon of terrorism and the global media, which any attack aimed at the dissemination of terror seeks to weaponize. Indeed, the turning of a physical object such as a commercial airliner into a weapon is only the most tangible aspect of a broader mechanism of weaponization, which extends to the media and religion among other things.

Suppose that the sprawling network of communication, information, and representation that constitute the global media performs the same function that the immune system plays in a biological organism. Like the immune system the global media would thus be a sixth sense able to learn from the encounter with external stimuli how to distinguish between invading pathogens and the organism's own healthy cells. In my parallel, this selection corresponds to the expansive as well as defensive role of the global media: on the one hand, the recognition of healthy cells creates the conditions of possibility for participation in the democratic life of the body politic, nourishing and protecting the public sphere's pluralism of opinions and their free expression; on the other, the selection between the organism's own cells and the pathogens should defend that same body politic from any colonizing attempts by private interests or the interest of given political associations as well as the instrumental use of information, communication, and representation.

Biologically, the selection between one's "own" healthy cell and "invading" pathogen occurs via a mirroring in which antibodies, the agents of the immune system, "photograph" or "film" the invaders, bind themselves to them, and kill them. In the same way, the global media mirrors whatever it encounters, by photographing, filming, and generally reporting on it. This is what I call its analytical function. Like the biological immune system, the global media expresses a critical function too, which consists in denouncing hegemonic attempts at centrally controlling, and thus impoverishing, what it is set to protect: the democratic body politic. The mirroring of the world, which per deontological mandate the media has to conduct as freely, deeply, and objectively as possible, is thus, and at the same time, the enabling condition for the media's detection of any infringements of its own freedom of movement and operation.

In the global arena, the media's analytical and critical roles have become less distinguishable, a fact that has brought new challenges. A reason for it is the blurring of the boundaries between news and entertainment, known as infotainment, which has complicated the distinction between analysis and critique by exploding the genre of the political commentary. Infotainment has reinvented and spectacularized political commentary allowing it to become more ideological, more

dependent on populist rhetoric, and in general more commercially oriented by ratings than by any reflective attempt at a critical appraisal of the issues.

Another reason for the merging between the media's analytical and critical functions rests with the exponential acceleration of the circulation of information, which includes instances of radical disenfranchisement from professional journalism. The ever more carefully staged studios producing mostly polarized, and polarizing, political commentary seem to be working in a stale format, remote from the vividness of what lands directly on the blogosphere, which bypasses both the cable networks and the printed press. This structural modification at the level of how information circulates represents both a challenge and a promise in terms of the global media's commitment to enact communicative democracy.

The phenomenon of this mostly informal reporting that tends to land on blogs and social networking sites is epitomized, I believe, by private cell phones, which allow the dissemination of vocal and visual messages around the world in real time, even in areas or situations that do not offer the immediate availability of a computer. Their role emerged clearly during the harrowing minutes between the impact of the planes against the Twin Towers and their collapse. Every second of that tragic segment of time was reported, denounced, and commented on by employees trapped in their offices in the upper floors of the North and the South towers. The callers were desperately trying to inform their families and the world of what was happening. The same has been true during the upheaval following the presidential elections in Iran, in June 2009. The pictures of the violence against demonstrators protesting the allegedly manipulated reelection of the conservative hawk, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, went around the world before the political establishment could even try to control what left the streets of Teheran.

An article that appeared in *The Guardian* (Tate and Weaver, 2009) exemplifies how Neda Soltani became the face of the Iranian upheaval. "Shortly after 5pm on Saturday afternoon, Hamed, an Iranian asylum seeker in the Netherlands, took a frantic call from a friend in Tehran. 'A girl has just been killed right next to me,' the friend said. It had all happened quickly. A young woman, chatting on her mobile phone, had been shot in the chest. She faded before a doctor, who was on the scene, could do anything to help. There was more. Hamed's friend, who does not want to be named, filmed the incident on his phone. Within moments the footage had landed in Hamed's inbox. Five minutes later it was on YouTube and Facebook. Within hours it had become one of the most potent threats faced by the Iranian regime in 30 years."

The dissemination and radical decentering of news production and circulation that has made Neda Soltani the face of a major political process is at the same time terrifying and promising, in proving and disproving what media theorist Murray Edelman has been claiming for years. "The spectacle constituted by news reporting continuously constructs and reconstructs social problems, crises, enemy, and leaders and so creates a succession of threats and reassurances" (Edelman, 1988, p. 1). Problems and personalities, according to Edelman, thus play a pivotal role in the dynamics of approval and disapproval of political causes, and it is especially this

constitutive role with respect to public opinion that is "masked by the assumption that citizens, journalists, and scholars are observers of 'facts' whose meaning can be accurately ascertained by those who are properly trained and motivated" (Edelman, 1988, p. 1). Neda's brief and poignant agony has rallied behind it public opinion from the four corners of the planet. As teenagers and some of their younger parents were browsing Facebook or checking the most popular videos on YouTube, Neda's face irrupted in their lives silently pleading for their attention. Congruently with Edelman's view, it is that irruption that has constructed the public opinion's uprising against the Ahmadinejad authoritarian regime. I am not sure that ideological interests were at play there. This changes the conditions under which the media can exercise its critical role, which thus needs to be reexamined.

Edelman is right in stating that the spectacle of news reporting constructs and reconstructs social and political issues. I also agree with him that, "because a social problem is not a verifiable entity but a construction that furthers ideological interests, its explanation is bound to be part of the process of construction rather than a set of falsifiable propositions." (Edelman, 1988, p. 18) Reducing a complex construction to a set of verifiable propositions runs the risk of forfeiting the deconstruction of the "ideological interests" the construction serves, which is, I believe, an essential aspect of the liberal-democratic mission of the media as a public watchdog. This deconstruction is certainly not encouraged by the positivist default assumption about the solidity of the distinction between fact and value, which makes facts and not values, or evaluations, the objects of reporting. This positivist assumption, based on the reduction of ambiguity to certainty, is indeed a dangerous and simplistic idealization that imports into the uneven and open-ended sphere of discourse the orderly methodological abstraction of quantitative reasoning. Unfortunately such idealization serves the interests of most mainstream news organizations: embedded in large corporations, these organizations are "more concerned about representing shareholders interests than embracing public-interest standards that might better serve democracy." The subservience of the press to the corporate world parallels what political scientists Lance Bennett, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston (2007) call the "tendency of the press to record rather than critically examine the official pronouncements of government." The massive failure of the American media in expressing their critical function with regard to the Iraq War and its alleged preemptive legitimacy is the product of that tendency.

The deconstruction of particular political, corporate, and ideological interests is an essential aspect of the liberal-democratic mission of the media: as media theorist Simon Cottle put it, it consists in "a combination of normative expectations deeply embedded in civil societies, regulatory requirements, and the professional raison d'être of journalism itself, all mandate a central responsibility in the communicative enactment of democracy" (Cottle, 2006, p. 22). However, what Neda's story shows is that, in its process of globalization, which is not only a question of geographical expansion but also a modification in the modes of production of our everyday existence, a considerable segment of information circulates independently from institutional or corporate-minded settings as well as structures of political

dominance and control. This fact renders the media's position as hopeful but also more fragile: on the one hand, information is being produced and exchanged over and beyond corporate and political constraints, thus representing a token of enacted communicative democracy. On the other, the spontaneous proliferation of data renders discriminating between reality and fiction, legitimate and counterfeit narratives, even more demanding. What are the new filters going to be? Will the cascade of informal production of news, circulated in the blogosphere, make the disoriented traditional media outlets even more dependent on the political and financial structures of dominance and control?

In the same way that biological autoimmunity disables the immune system from distinguishing between an organism's "own" healthy cells and the invading pathogens, an attack aimed at the spreading of terror eats at the media's ability to pursue its critical commitment to the communicative enactment of democracy. Minimally, this enactment consists in denouncing any attempts to colonize the space in which information circulates and communication occurs. Weakened in its ability to appropriately select between healthy reporting and the pathological colonization of its space by both corporate pressure and the informal news production landing directly on the blogosphere, the media may easily become an agent of diffusion of terror, a panic that takes hold of the public stage by incrementally silencing all other voices, images, and figures. It is as if an act of terror was able, in the context of the global media network, to disrupt the mechanism of clonal selection, whereby lymphocytes are replicated according to a dual division of labor. After mirroring the attackers, one clone combats the infection, while the other protects the organism from future invasions by transforming the pathogen's imprint into immunological memory. In the presence of the terrorist threat the clone fighting the infection is muted, so that the pathogen is free to colonize the host and its immunological memory.

In the case of the violence against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the colonization of the media, and as a consequence of the public sphere, was easily achieved at the visual level: the image of the gutted Towers and of their eerily elegant implosion smothered the global flow of information effortlessly in the short-term. Long-term, however, the violence produced equally destructive consequences at the level of political and social discourse, which seemed to succumb under the weight of a constricting rhetoric of demonization and victimization. Undoubtedly, the political responsibility for that rhetoric falls squarely onto the Bush administration that imposed it as the only respectable mode of response to the attacks. However, in addition to it, I am also suggesting the presence of a systemic malfunctioning of the media that, for lack of a better description, may be compared to an autoimmune response. Terrorism, and this is my argument, is like a virus that gets hold of the media's software and disarms it to the point of making it self-destruct. This is what I have called weaponization, an effect that terrorism, now projected on the global stage, seems to be able to produce on the entire discursive field.

In the face of this challenge, different media ought to respond in ways tailored to the specific structure. Also, given the different formats in which information is being circulated, each medium has to apply distinct criteria in judging those formats in relation to the concurrent risks of colonization and weaponization. In other words it is necessary to examine, as Cottle put it, "how established media forms mediatize, that is shape, facilitate, and condition the communication of conflicts, sometimes in the most decisive of ways" (Cottle, 2006, p. 21). For example, studies focusing on television as a specific medium, such as David Altheide's (1987), have sought to understand how "'event-type' reports associated with regular evening news broadcasts tends to focus on the visuals of the aftermath and tactics of terrorism, while 'topic-type' format associated with interviews and documentary presentation are more likely to include materials about purposes, goals, and rationals" (Cottle, 2006, p. 21) Altheide's argument is that event-type reports, focused on images of destruction and dehumanization, feed into media colonization and weaponization more than topic-type formats. The polarization between victims and perpetrators, which became the language of information in the aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers, is an instrinsic feature of those kinds of images which, in the absence of adequate topic-type reporting, obstruct the communicative enactment of democracy.

The global media is thus at constant risk of falling prey to a "take over" that, as an autoimmune response, may spin out of control. I think that since September 11, 2001 such a take-over did spin out of control as evidenced by the new hegemony of the most alarmist format of all: "breaking news." Cottle put figures on my intuition that, in the post-9/11 phase, this kind of format seemed to have permanently taken over television news programs. According to his research, a total of 74.3% of all news deliver either "thin" updates on the events on the war on terror, or news stories dominated by a single external news source, usually the institutional and political elites, which during the Bush administration years replicated and deepened the polarizing language of Al Qaeda's own press releases. Another cumulative 19% is taken by what Cottle calls the "contest" and "contention" frames. The contest frame is one in which "conflictual news stories are framed in terms of binary opposition, with opposing views and arguments generally given approximately equal weight or representation and structured in adversarial terms." (Cottle, 2006, p. 27) The contention frame is a variation of the contest frame because, in it, "an increased array of voices or perspectives may be represented, in contrast to only two opposed views" (Cottle, 2006, p. 27). Finally, a meager 0.3% of all news is covered using the "exposé/investigative" frame, "based on intensive research and exploratory fact-finding as well as exposé journalism of public and private affairs," (Cottle, 2006, p. 28) which is the frame best suited to disrupt colonization attempts and more apt at securing public engagement. These are stunning statistics and they apply to perhaps still the most politically influential global media today: television. Any segment of the media establishment should review its operations in light of these numbers, if it does not want to mindlessly reproduce the same violence that terror encourages. A violence that is "visualized, incessant, universal, ahistorical, without a political context or motivation" (Cottle, 2006, p. 37)

There Shall Be No Mourning

Instead of protecting the pluralism of the democratic body politic the autoimmune response tends to destroy it and does so by flooding the public arena with images and narratives that do not only represent and voice terror but repeat its violence incessantly, intimating its indefinite multiplication. Repetition is thus at the center of my proposal to rethink the critical role of the media on the global stage. Biological immunity is, again, a useful analogy to illustrate it.

If immunity is a kind of cellular memory that allows the body to learn by experience how to fight a given pathogen, and then to never forget it, amnesia leaves the body without defense – but is amnesia not the endless repetition of the same? In articulating a similar point, Mitchell notes "the convergence of cloning and terrorism as cultural icons of the principal techno-scientific anxieties of our time" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 914). From Hollywood to Bollywood cloning is associated with images of horror and dehumanization, eugenic experiments and cyborgs. "The figure of the clone itself, as a mindless, even headless repository of 'spare parts' ... all turn out to be handy images of the terrorist himself. Terrorist and clone," Mitchell continues, "unite in the stereotype of the mindless automaton, an organism whose individuality has been eliminated, fit only for a suicide mission" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 914). The exact replica of a lifeform, namely, the clone, is also used to describe terrorist networks as organic tissues whose "cells" tend to clone themselves. Repetition, thus, picks out in many converging ways how narratives of terrorist identity as well as images of the terrorist's inhumanity and destructiveness are aired and circulated.

The effect of repetition is that all kinds of differences fade. Whether it is the difference between places, contexts, or faces, repetition empties out whatever is distinctive and irreducible, singular, and unique. Any difference in kind, if repeated long enough, becomes a difference in degree, a quantitative matter and as quantity sets in as the fundamental evaluative parameter, attention is turned away from what it is that is being counted, statistically analyzed, and numerically interpreted. Consequently, the identity of the units belonging to a given set is simplified because the focus now shifts onto pitting set against one another, or grouping them together in order to taxonomically organize them. As it happens to stories and characters strictly adhering to a literary or cinematic genre, from detective novels to Western films, storylines as well as faces crystallize into easily recognizable molds that eventually essentialize all identity, whether it is the identity of a group or an individual, rendering it substitutable and irrelevant.

The popularity of Pavlovian experiments with conditioned reflexes, whereby a given response can be made to occur to almost any stimulus simply by exposing the subject to the same chain of events over and over again, is behind the default positivist assumption that repetition produces recognition. My argument stems, instead, from the opposite standpoint: that repetition does not produce recognition, because recognition involves a cognitive operation of selection of its own.

Nineteenth century philosopher, Georg W.F. Hegel, gave an account of recognition that seems eerily close to the basic grammar of immunity, which, as we saw, is based on the cellular memory's ability to select between what is the organism's "own" and what is "foreign" to it, what is friendly to it and what is inimical. Said very roughly, to recognize means, for both Hegel and biological immunity, to be able to differentiate between what is the same and can be seamlessly repeated, and what is different, assumed as what stands in the way of the repetition of the same. In a parallel manner, the human subject in the Hegelian tradition and the individual organism in immunological science both face what is different by engaging in a struggle aimed at subduing it. Hegel defines this struggle as dialectical in nature because, whether it ends in the elimination of what is different, the other, or in its subjugation, it involves a contact with it that leaves its trace in the self. For Hegelian philosophy, the dialectical relation characterizes the social bond, the relation of interdependence between the individual and the community. In the case of the immune system, a similar dialectics defines the relation between host and invader: the assimilation of the invader by the host is obtained via the formation of antibodies that mirror the structure of the invading pathogen and remain permanently stored in the organism's immunological memory. Biology and politics, and more specifically, immunology and Hegelian political theory converge in a description of recognition as a dialectical relation, and thus a relation of interdependence, between self and others, host and invaders.

As Hegel himself claimed in a famous chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, entitled "Absolute Freedom and Terror," the experience of terror annihilates all sense of interdependence. With its spectacularization of violence and all-consuming focus on the enemy, any act associated with spreading terror demands an extreme polarization that reduces the world to irreconcilable opposites: perpetrators and victims, oppressors and oppressed, evil and good. As a last argument of this essay I wish to suggest an interpretation of acts of terror as those acts that deny all human interdependence.

The global media that under ordinary conditions has the function of the immunitary system, faced with acts of terror responds by deploying an autoimmunitary response whose distinctive feature is, as we have seen, the inability to recognize its own healthy cells from the invading pathogen. While in a biological organism that confusion brings the immune system to destroy its own tissue, in the social and political realm the confusion makes the global media lose its critical force and replicate terror, by disseminating it in all corners of the planet and projecting it onto an indefinite future. Alongside theorist Judith Butler, I want to claim that what connects two partners in a relation of mutual dependence is the recognition of "precariousness," understood as their shared exposure to vulnerability and the risk of loss. Butler's (2009) suggestion is that we recognize each other to be different but also interdependent if and only if we are able to recognize under what conditions the life of the other, like mine, can be sustained. This recognition is predicated on the awareness that we are both facing vulnerability and the risk of loss. In other words, I recognize the other for its difference from me only in the context of

our common exposure to the possibility of grief. Grievability, therefore, is a necessary condition for the recognition of the other. My argument is that, in order to enact some control over the autoimmunitary response caused by terrorism, the global media's ethical mandate is to reinstate precariousness both on deontological grounds and because of its present uneven distribution. Reinstating precariousness in public discourse would reduce the political manipulation of grievability and mourning, which is part and parcel of the social and political use of terror.

The notion of precariousness, in Butler's theory, is founded on her assumption that to be a body, human or otherwise, is to be exposed to "social crafting." Butler writes, "the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces ... that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing" (Butler, 2009, p. 3). Butler's point here is that the body is neither a purely biological entity nor a socially self-sufficient one. Rather, like the human subject, the body is constituted through "norms, which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized" (Butler, 2009, pp. 3–4). The set of norms, or normative conditions, that produce subjects and bodies by making them recognizable have "historically contingent ontologies." Since they are historically contingent, these ontologies can be analyzed as politically saturated frames.

Butler (2009) observes that existing norms allocate recognition differentially, as a function of a given population, nation, or community's political weight, social relevance, and visibility by and access to the global media. As a consequence, since recognition means apprehending the precariousness of the life of the other, there are others whose precariousness is not recognized. These are expendable lives, lives without needs, lives represented as not facing mortality. These are lives that are reductively perceived as simply "living" and thus as not belonging to an individuated agent. If precariousness means that life is subject to social and economic conditions that put my existence in the hands of others, a life perceived as nonprecarious is a life whose vulnerability is obscured, and thus a life that cannot be grieved or mourned. Concurrently, a lack of recognition of a life's precariousness entails to be relieved of all responsibility for it.

My claim is that acts seeking to spread terror work precisely by obscuring life's vulnerability. The question is how that concealment occurs. The more explicit way is by dehumanizing the lives of the victims' who, in spite of being mostly innocent civilians, are taken to be siding with the supposed enemy just by virtue of working in a given office building, praying at a mosque or a temple, or staying at a hotel. However, vulnerability is obscured in other ways too, which are generally harder to spot. In discussing nationalism, Butler claims that it "works in part by producing and sustaining a certain version of the subject ... produced and sustained through powerful forms of media." We cannot forget, Butler admonishes, "that what gives power to their version of the subject is precisely the way in which they are able to render the subject's own destructiveness righteous and its own destructibility *unthinkable*" (Butler, 2009, p. 47). What Butler says about nationalism, one of the historical motivations for terrorist activity, can be easily applied to the workings of the kind of terrorism from the post-9/11 era. For the occlusion of vulnerability

does not only concern the victim's life but also the perpetrator's life and goes hand in hand with her sense of untainted righteousness, whether the agent is an individual, a group, or a state. There is yet another way in which precariousness is concealed: through the high symbolic power of the target of the attack. Anything entailing the context evaporates under the symbolic force of the attack. This vaporization clouds the precariousness that would make the devastation and the maiming of the urban environment unbearable to watch. So, not only the precariousness of the victims, but also the precariousness of the perpetrators as well as of the context in which the violence takes place are all buried under the rubble.

In the face of the immense ethical challenge of reporting violence aimed at spreading terror and in order to control its own role in disseminating more violence, the global media has to keep precariousness in sight because it is the media, even much more powerfully than the ideological justifications embraced by the agents of destruction, that can operate on what we have indicated as the norms that regulate the recognizability of life. Terrorism sustains its practices by acting on the global audience's sensibility, its "structure of feeling and reference" to use an expression by theorist Edward Said. Such structure gets crafted so that the public exposed to the spectacle of violence will apprehend the world selectively. For example, the practice of "embedded journalism," which was implemented by the Bush Administration since the invasion of Iraq and was accepted by the media organizations to get closer to action on the battlefield, crucially contributed to crafting the public's structure of feeling and reference toward the Iraq War for years on end. It did so by seeking to control not only "what" the public was being exposed to and shielded from seeing or hearing, but also by determining "how," namely, from what perspective the public was apprehending others, their vulnerability and invulnerability, humanity and inhumanity. That perspective, as Butler notes, "is a way of interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception." Scenes of war "are meant to be established by the perspective that the Department of Defense orchestrates and permits, thereby illustrating the orchestrative power of the state to ratify what will be called reality: the extent of what is perceived to exist" (Butler, 2009, p. 66). The perspective does not address "what" the public was being exposed to during the Bush years but "how" whatever was being presented to it had been selected. By calling attention to the fact that perspective is an a priori interpretation of what can be included *and* excluded by the framing of the media, Butler makes a subtle point, dense with theoretical and practical consequences. Contrasting acts of terror with acts of war clarifies why. Acts of war have a state behind them that regulates the perspective of their frames intentionally at least at some degree. Thanks to its "orchestrative power," to keep with Butler's terms, the state ratifies "what will be called reality." By contrast, acts of terror in the post-9/11 phase, express an iconic violence whose intention is hard to spell out in terms of immediate strategic goals. In this sense, the frame engendered by an act of terror structures as much by excluding that which should not be recognizable from the perceptual field, as they do by including in it that which is deemed appropriate or necessary to be recognized. Unlike acts of war, and as a

consequence of the autoimmune response of the global media, the violence expressed in the act of terror becomes itself the agent behind the regulation of perspective. In replicating and circulating the bare images and narratives of a violent attack, the media excludes the very issue of precariousness from the perceptual field.

Although there is plenty of space for self-criticism by the media establishment we should resist the temptation of picturing the dissemination of terror as an intentional strategy because terror is not fully and exclusively in the media's hands. Responsibility for obscuring precariousness cannot be attributed to any Chief Puppeteer or to the overarching will of any individuated agent. Rather, as Butler cogently affirms, that obscuring "takes place by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect – and so sometimes takes place against one's will or, indeed, in spite of oneself" (Butler, 2009, p. 67). As life unfolds, actions and events are figures emerging from a background that cannot be represented comprehensively, but only pointed at in terms of its delimiting role. The media's necessary framing of those events and actions, besides the deliberations of its editors, carries within it additional influences that include the structuring effects of norms, which perhaps can be captured by what the German tradition of Critical Theory referred to as "mentalities," a term close in meaning to what today we call culture but with a much sharper critical edge than culture. A mentality is a structure of feeling and reference. It is also the invisible pattern of those convictions, dispositions, attitudes, and preferences of an individual or an organization, only apparently disconnected from one another. If bound together into a "mentality," the pattern looks like the expression of deep "personality" trends that reveal the internalization of the norms of recognizability of life, which govern the uneven distribution between the lives united in precariousness, and thus grievable, and the lives beyond vulnerability, and thus ungrievable.

In this context, the media's primary commitment should be to instigate the recognition of shared precariousness by articulating how that recognition readily translates into a call to securing the conditions for sustainable lives on egalitarian grounds. Concurrently, the media should take very seriously the interminable task of self-scrutiny. Due to the simultaneous production and circulation of discourse, this means attempting to reconstruct the hidden presence of a structure of feeling and reference, attitude and mentality within its own process of framing. The kind of self-scrutiny I have in mind could then be driven by the following questions: Do our framings include enough strong normative commitments to equality and the universalizing of rights for basic human needs? Are we taking into account only material needs, or are we trying to identify symbolic, communicative, or representational needs? Does the framing we use most frequently give voice to the uneven distribution of precariousness that went undetected thus far?

The fault with the way in which the global media responds to violence aimed at spreading terror is much deeper, and graver, than a strategic penchant for market-friendly sensationalism that many impute to the coverage of terrorist attacks. The fault sinks very powerful roots in the functioning of a media grown global very

rapidly and facing the constant evolution of the modes in which we produce our ordinary existence. The story of how the agonizing face of Neda Soltani became the face of the Iranian resistance in June 2009 illustrated some of these changes. This is why the media's regulating ideal cannot anymore be balanced and analytical reporting. If examined through the figure of autoimmunity, the fault in media reporting is a pathological flattening and shrinking of the parameters of recognition. Flooded by images and narratives of destruction and dehumanization, it is as if the global media faced the panic of being forced to recognize as real what had been safely presented and experienced as unreal, in films, video-games, and other mass cultural products. Under that pressure, the immune system of the democratic body politic but also of our individual and collective sensibility, as embodied by the global media network, begins to misfire. As more disturbing images and narratives invade the communicative arena, a numbing of perception and affect sets in and allows the public to form a view of the other as not fully real, or human, because it is either demonized or victimized to the extreme. In either case, the lives of distant others are not framed as vulnerable, mortal, and thus grievable. While those "others" are oftentimes grouped and objectified into a "them," they would need to recover the multifaceted reality that constitutes our shared humanity, vulnerability to suffering, and constant exposure to the risk of loss. The same reification, however, haunts the "we," whether it refers to we, the viewers, we, the citizens of a mature constitutional democracy, or we, the members of a criminal organization aiming at spreading terror.

The founding obligation of the global media is thus to disrupt any proclamation of both "we" and "them" by any collective actor, since a group, a nation, or a culture is not only delimited by other groups but also internally differentiated. Any group contains a sub-group, which is oftentimes related to other groups and their own subgroups in a complicated, sometimes conflictual, manner. Moreover, every group has a history that shapes its self-understanding and its mission and by looking at a group through the lens of time one automatically separates its apparent cohesion of membership and purpose, namely, its unity. Finally, any "we" as any "them" is also internally differentiated into singular unique individuals whose identity is crafted and recrafted constantly by their relations to others and themselves, by the forces shaping the context in which they live or which they left behind, by all the discursive framings and their distinct effects on each self.

The work of self-scrutiny, deconstruction of frames and reconstruction of mentalities, does not offer the guarantees of a classical normative ethics, founded on governing principles and individual rights and duties. The ethics that I envision is hyperbolic because it is ultimately an interminable but not impossible endeavor. It requires steady commitment to the enactment of communicative democracy, high tolerance for confusion and ambiguity, and the willingness to take risks. It also entails putting a positive value on the most difficult kind of recognition: the recognition of the spectrality of freedom in an interconnected world and, even more importantly, among interdependent human subjects.

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