

The threshold of the monstrous, between dehumanization and necro-capitalism

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The subject of the following contribution is a discussion of the theses in R.L. Smith's volume 'Making Monster,' on the relationship between processes of dehumanization and the production of monstrosity. Reading the multiple facets of this link, the contribution tries to highlight some lines of analysis. The first of analysis concerns on the epistemic status of the concept of dehumanization. The second, on the other hand, concerns the actual dimensions of the processes of monstrosity production within the multiple social, temporal and political layers of the concept of crisis.

Keywords: dehumanization, production of monstrosity, necro-capitalism, multiple social and political layers, crisis

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The monster is the negation of order, natural and historical. And thus, he is also the negation of biological and social order. But, the adjective “monstrous” is often placed and contextualized within frames that present actions and events of a negative nature, whether man-made or ecological and environmental catastrophes. In this sense, the concept of the “monster” is the *trait d’union* between the pole of “nature” and “culture”, an element that can provide a meaning for reading the set of events or subjective categories that do not fit into either pole. The monster, in fact, “exalts” the animal and exceptional, hence feral, qualities of the subject, and rationalizes events, grants them a framework for interpreting them, and de-emphasizes social structures from any guilt, attributing them to medical and psychiatric pathologies. But reflecting, today, on the concept of the monster and the monstrous involves a detour into global current events. And, despite everything, the concept of monster continues to refer to the *xenos*, the outsider, the different, the reduction of the other to an enemy.

Is it possible to hold together a critique of these two devices, restoring to the difference that the monster brings that function of critiquing and imagining different scenarios? Philosopher David Livingstone Smith’s recent book *Making monsters. The uncanny power of dehumanization* highlights the intimate and genetic link between the social production of monstrosity and processes of dehumanization, through a phenomenology of dehumanization processes and an epistemological reading of them. In Smith’s hands, dehumanization is a veritable ideological, normative, and political machine, operating by fragmenting society and classifying individuals through biological, medical, psychological, and legal discourse. The production of monstrosity, in this sense, goes hand in hand with the stabilization of the political and social order, highlighting both the barriers of the social milieu and the thresholds of access to the category of human life

itself. And, habituation to the brutality that pervades society should come as no surprise. The eyes of citizens/viewers are habituated to scenes of war, private brutalities, to living with ecological catastrophes near and far. But it is precisely the perception of distance, of what allows some subjects to neutralize and eliminate, with a stroke of a pen or with concrete actions, other subjects from the roster of the human, that determines this general social posture. The following note tries to analyze the theses advanced by the book with two interpretive axes. The first of these has as its object the epistemological, moral and political status of the idea of dehumanization, whereas the second tries to verify the effects of this device within necrocapitalism, of the (self) destructive tendencies that characterize the capitalist machine of production and exploitation, which reinforce liberal-conservative and authoritarian tendencies in the ideological and political spheres, and which enable the perception of the other as the “absolute enemy” to be fought and eliminated.

For Smith, the operational machinery of dehumanization is linked to a certain idea of the human, derived from the concept of the “Great Chain of Being” that has characterized the development of Western culture. This concept, in fact, operates a synthesis between body and mind, binding the subject to a specific idea of the *cogito*, and determines a normative standard to which to conform. As G. Canguilhem has extensively explained, scientific discourse draws on the idea of pathology to construct a real idea of norm capable of producing a grid to explain biological (and social) phenomena. The exception, in fact, is used as a yardstick of normal functioning; the norm is a plastic device that captures and reshapes data to construct an average epistemological standard.

The perception of what is worthy of belonging to the human, thus, is constructed as a negative cast of what human is not, through taxonomies, data collections, ideological and religious affiliations. More importantly, this idea of the human is linked to a specific idea of Nature, considered as an immutable characteristic and as a specific property that type of human can and should appropriate. The threshold of access to the field of the human moves through a grid whereby processes of social differentiation acquire normative force by virtue of the political and cultural hegemony acquired by the social groups that proclaim themselves “possessors” of this truth. This kind of discourse is completely traversed by the racist and *exterminist* practices that characterized colonial modernity and the twentieth-century Total State epic, particularly the Nazi regime, which famously set

up a veritable industrial production machine of mortality. Teratology and racism, as Smith puts it, are not mere ideological phenomena or mere dark pages in the history of progress, but individual voices of the more general phenomenon of dehumanization. The latter, in fact, does not proceed simply by objectifying subjectivities, depriving them of their dignity or disciplining them, but by animalizing them, turning them into beasts devoid of reason. In the terms of Greek classicism, the barbarian, the one who does not speak the language of the place, is reduced to pure *zoon*, thus completely deprived of the linguistic function and, therefore, of the characteristics that distinguish the human. Teratology and racism, as Smith puts it, are not mere ideological phenomena or mere dark pages in the history of progress, but individual voices of the more general phenomenon of dehumanization. The latter, in fact, does not proceed simply by objectifying subjectivities, depriving them of their dignity or disciplining them, but by animalizing them, turning them into beasts devoid of reason. In terms of Greek classicism, the barbarian, the one who does not speak the language of the place, is reduced to pure *zoon*, thus completely deprived of the linguistic function and, therefore, of the characteristics that distinguish the human. But one is at the same time beyond the threshold of expendability hypothesized by Agamben in his work. Indeed, Smith writes:

Dehumanized people are often physically indistinguishable from those who dehumanize them, and even in cases where there are striking physical differences, such as the dehumanization of Black People by Whites, the target population is not thought of as less than human because of their outward appearance. Rather, their appearance is imagined to conceal something deeper about them, something that is located inside them¹.

What determines in *interiore homine* the status of humanity is, evidently, a determined ontological disposition to the classification and appropriation of time and space: the mythology of *homo faber*, in this case, coincides with the missionary vocation of Western Man to spread civilization and neutralize the monstrous residue that lives outside the range of the *Cogito*. The key word for this set of processes is anthropotechnic. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk was the one who best defined this specific disposition of the human subject toward the constant mutation of the world through technical devices.

¹ D.L. Smith, *Making Monsters. The uncanny power of dehumanization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2021, p. 52.

Drawing on philosophical anthropology and existential phenomenology, Sloterdijk characterizes technique as a prosthesis of the human, a means by which he, in an attempt to construct and shape an immunological environment, a veritable sphere of biological and social life, operates a *Selektion* between what can be and what cannot be human². The monstrous is the spectacular side of exclusion, the catalog of freaks and different on which to channel people's gazes. From Enlightenment museums to human zoos via literature on the fantastic, the non-human is shown as anti-norm, it is characterized by moral and theological content. The monster materializes the anthropological dimension of sin and is used metaphorically to materialize the nightmares of the lack of stability of the social order. Racism, in its totalitarian and democratic variants, is perceived as a necessary evil to make society as homogeneous as possible, to classify the excluded-monsters as lesser than human, as targets. The tradition of the human is thus revealed to be an extremely entrenched mythology, shaped through the myth of blood purity, elevated to a normative standard through the definition of what a body can, thus revealing racism as a surface phenomenon, inscribed in a larger ideological habitus. The centrality of this idea of the human serves as a connecting vector to the second pole of the analysis, that aimed at highlighting the material phenomenology of dehumanization. Here, the production of monstrosity designates the highest degree of enmity that runs through contemporary societies. The intensity of this absolute enmity should be related as much to the conditions of environmental destruction as to the growing phenomena of authoritarianism, in both cases founded on the dogma of market freedom and the necessity of hierarchy as a corrective to the feral dimension of the human itself. Monstrosity designates, in this context, the foreign body that wants to break the sphere of immunity, or, in concrete terms, wants to overstep the boundaries, freely dispose of its body, express its thoughts. Immunity, a concept that is often translated from the scientific-medical field into the ethical and social field, is a key element in describing the processes of monstrosity production. Through this concept, in fact, it is possible to produce a dividing line between a standard biological system, which presents itself as closed and impermeable, and what lies outside it, which can attack it and make it vulnerable. In this sense, immunity further designates a threshold of distinction and protection between that which is internal and

² P. Sloterdijk, *Not Saved. Essays after Heidegger*, Polity Press, London 2016.

that which is external, between Self and Other, between a state of normality and pathology³. In social science terms, immunity designates the system of protection and self-defense of social systems. The monster is the one who lives as human without being human, hiding something harmful and destructive to the existing order; it is the one who attends to the biopolitical constitution of the idea of nature. In essence, the monster is the figure that separates and includes the functions of Nature and Culture, which makes the becoming-animal visible and causes its own exclusion.

A little genealogical study on monstruosity, in this context, is helpful to focus on two similar concepts, which designate a different relationship of subjectivity with its own space and time: the “*uncanny*” and the “*haunt*”. Smith, wanting to highlight the ambivalent status of the discourse on the human, brings to the plate the concept of *Unheimlich*, in English *Uncanny*, that feeling of estrangement that involves the subject when he or she is in contact with the different or the other. The first concept, in Sigmund Freud’s fundamental formulation, describes the relationship between the removal of certain types of events in the psyche and their emergence in the form of psychosis in the unconscious and the behavioural sphere. In fact, the German etymology of the term refers to something situated in the ambivalence between habit and exception, between the familiar and the unknown, which keeps its own dangerous potential intact through an ineliminable latency⁴. The other descriptive pole, haunt, starting from the concept of “*hauntologies*”, describes the non-contemporary experience of time, in which the past does not end in the present, and the possibility of unpredictable futures remains open. Radicalizing the theoretical statute of the concept, Mark Fisher linked it to the “*eerie*”, to the unknown presence of the outside, to the potential of the lost futures that wander through time in the form of cultural and political ghosts. The metaphor of spectral time shows its strength in deconstructing capitalist realism, without necessarily opening the door to the easy enthusiasm of positive utopias, but giving imaginative and material strength to the monsters and ghosts removed and foreclosed, which return in a threatening and destructive way⁵. In the author’s own words,

³ M. Neocleous, *The Politics of Immunity*, Verso Books, London-New York 2022.

⁴ S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, in J.A. Weinstock (ed. by) *The Monster Theory Reader*, Minnesota University Press, St. Paul 2020, pp. 59-88.

⁵ M. Fisher, *Ghosts of my life*, Zero Books, Washington 2012; Id, *The weird and the eerie*, Repeater Books, London 2016.

Dehumanized people are experienced as uncanny by their dehumanizers, because they violate the human/subhuman boundary. (...) Every culture has some conception of the natural order: a framework of categories that are used to make the world intelligible. (...) Dehumanized people are regarded as anomalous being, but this is not because of how they appear. We classify them as human on the basis of their appearance, and as a subhuman⁶.

The “double consciousness” of dehumanization operates, with extreme clarity, as an ideological and material machine that determines the forms of inclusion from the construction of an imaginary monster. It is possible to define the effect of this construction associating Uncanny and Monstrous as the “ideological code of fear”. The latter operates on two different levels. The first of these effects is a kind of education, or pedagogy, to horror and abjection, which, like the virus, are structuring elements of the cognitive horizon of the human psyche. As analyzed by Julia Kristeva from a psychoanalytic perspective, horror structures the boundaries of the subjective (and collective) unconscious, manifesting itself as abjection, as a disturbing and foreign object that disturbs identity⁷. Here horror is the liminal space between the quest for immunity and the dimension of the monstrous, thus a spy that ideally identifies a potential danger. The ideological dimension of this “code of fear” produces, as a direct consequence, fragmentation and individualization, fostered by the construction of an enemy against which to turn emotional excesses. The ideological dimension of this “code of fear” produces, as a direct consequence, fragmentation and individualization, favoured by the construction of an enemy against whom to turn the emotional excesses. Individual fragmentation, which finds fertile ground in the intensified division of labour and alternative forms of social hierarchy, accentuates depressive tendencies, sad passions and narcissism. In the social sphere, however, streams of violence emerge publicly as misogynistic, racist and vaguely authoritarian discourses. In an even more conservative twist of public discourse, the people replace the constituted powers, claiming for themselves both the racial traits of biological and sexual belonging, and create their own enemy ad hoc in order to strengthen their conditions of existence. This set of subterranean passions, which suture economic and existential precariousness with hatred, resentment

⁶ D.L. Smith, *Making Monsters. The uncanny power of dehumanization*, cit., pp. 248-250.

⁷ J. Kristeva, *Pouvoir de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*, Seuil, Paris 1980.

and anger, produces its own specific political form that, in Sloterdijk's words, can be called *timocracy*. With the concept of timocracy, the philosopher names the emotional structure that channels reactive passions and transforms them into movements of collective self-assertion, declined in the multiple forms of political action⁸. Abstracting from the specific corpus of Sloterdijk's study, what we would like to emphasize is the inflationary dimension of anger. The timotic bond, in fact, acquires value as an experience of the "negative", as a destructive and self-destructive tension to be channelled against the Enemy with a capital E. Here, the machinery of dehumanization is inscribed on the emotional temperature of a closed social structure devoted to cynicism and opportunism. Using Virno's⁹ (1990) and Berlant's¹⁰ (2022) research, the conservative twisting of social passions and feelings come to create a bubble whereby other people become an inconvenience, a necessary evil to be dealt with but, if possible, to be neutralized. And, to use Sloterdijk's thought again, it can be inferred that the mirror antinomy of the monster is that of *Homo Immunologicus*, the inhabitant of Western modernity. For the German philosopher, in fact, this figure is the specific subject who is constantly struggling with himself, who must take care of himself and shun excesses¹¹. Consequently, the arbitrary perception of social vulnus reverses the precarious perception of the autoimmune subject described by Sloterdijk, as one who desires protection and strives to defend his or her own body and, in a broader sense, the collective one as well. This widespread sense of immunological protection, which the global pandemic has amplified, is intensely linked to the discursive and ideological structure of necro-capitalism. Indeed, health emergencies highlighted the unstoppable nature of capitalism even in the face of the growing number of deaths, and the need to find a scapegoat on which to blame systemic functionality. In those tragic and mournful months, the various communicative machines became the voice of a more general sense of fear present within the social fabric, to turn any violator of emergency regulations into a monster capable of attacking the medical and biological stability of society itself. It is necessary to highlight the operating mechanism of this political, medical, economic and communicative

⁸ P. Sloterdijk, *Ira e Tempo. Saggio politico-psicologico*, Meltemi, Milano 2007.

⁹ AA.VV., *Sentimenti dell'aldiquà*, Theoria, Roma 1989.

¹⁰ L. Berlant, *On the inconvenience of the other people*, Duke University Press, Durham 2022.

¹¹ P. Sloterdijk, *Devi cambiare la tua vita*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2010.

machine. The total mobilization of human and material resources during the epidemiological crisis highlighted the economic machine's indifference to human existence, blatantly electing scarcity as the proper statute of necrocapitalism¹². The same material device of scarcity has revived the narrative of thrift, sacrifice, and unconditional availability to the call of labor, legitimizing itself in the eyes of common sense through the creation of specific categories of enemy-monsters. This paradoxical link between the horizon of wealth and the quest for security has strengthened the internal immune bond within communities, making them increasingly exclusive and indifferent to tragedies, consequently perceived as external events and to be neutralized. The same material device of scarcity has revived the narrative of thrift, sacrifice, and unconditional availability to the call of labor, legitimizing itself in the eyes of common sense through the creation of specific categories of enemy-monsters. This paradoxical link between the horizon of wealth and the quest for security has strengthened the internal immune bond within communities, making them increasingly exclusive and indifferent to tragedies, consequently perceived as external events and to be neutralized. It is precisely the current climate of widespread insecurity that reinforces Smith's analyses of the processes of dehumanization, which in this case have material repercussions in the daily news: aggression, violence, and denigrating media campaigns in fact are the matrix of the production of absolute hostility toward marginal subjects. The production of the monstrosity goes to inscribe itself in a kind of exhibitionist pornography of violence and exclusion which, reproduced through technological devices, is reduced to the rank of divertissement, of media content to be disseminated. The highest degree of dehumanization, *de facto*, comes to coincide with the zero degree of a different social bond, based on solidarity and mutual care.

To conclude briefly, Smith's book offers an interesting and useful analysis of the link between monster production and processes of dehumanization, and allows us to think about a new social ethic of inclusion, mutualism, and cooperation. First, the terms of production and imputation of monstrosity should be reversed, displacing it from subjects to economic structures: what is monstrous are the devices of high-tech economic accumulation, which behind promises of wealth and freedom hide competition, exclusion

¹² M.I. Asma, *On Necrocapitalism. Plague journal*, Kersplebedeb, Montreal 2022.

and poverty. Freeing the poor and marginalized from the monstrous stigma of insecurity, in this sense, can open up margins for comprehensive social transformation. The monster, in this sense, can once again become a specter that stirs the sleep of rulers. In another context of economic and productive transformation, Lucio Castellano spoke of “*hopefulmonsters*”, monsters full of hope, those subjects produced by the neoliberal counterrevolution and the restructuring of the labor market, located on the margins and subject to processes of disciplining and repression, who carried in their wombs the possibility of a new and different social transformation¹³.

One can conclude by stating that this theoretical project designates a biopolitics of the “more-than-human”, that is, of the production of the living in a non-anthropological perspective, which requires specific forms of inclusive justice that sabotage the threshold of distinction between human and non-human. Thus, the figure of the monster can become the metaphor of the desire for transformation. The monster represents, in fact, the reference figure of plasticity, because it is the manifestation of abnormality, of punishment for acts against nature, of opposition to the gods, or the modern fruit of incest between man and technology, both in the reactionary vulgate as a product of the Promethean will to power to escape the given form and destiny, and in the more classical terms of teratology and its inscription in the moral registers of positivist criminology and medicine. At the same time, the monster is the hope of the possibility of new forms of relationship and new practices of justice, because it contains within itself the germs of a symbolic and material transformation of bodies, both actual and virtual, and of the habitat, both natural and silicon: it is, to all intents and purposes, a new agent of knowledge. Today, in the wake of what has been argued so far, we can return to thinking about this antagonistic function of the monstrosity, illuminating the ethical and political power that lives in the margins of post-pandemic societies, and to constructing this new ethics of the human, which both Smith and the writer of these notes believe may be possible. Moving beyond Smith’s theses, in fact, we can further think of the monster as the subject that sublimates the distinction between Nature and Culture, so that we can imagine a new ecology of knowledge and a new culture of communal living.

¹³ L. Castellano, *La politica della moltitudine*, Manifestolibri, Rome 1997.