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Images of Sub-humaniy and their Realization

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Abstract
Two extreme cases of state violence are contrasted: one is the Great Leap famine and the Cultural Revolution in Maoist China; the other is the war of conquest and policy of racial purification conducted by Nazi Germany. The anthropological angle of enquiry is to place them in their own historical conditions, even as exceptions, and to ask how they exemplify the realization of inherited images of sub-humanity. The inherited traditions are derived from three sources: those of images of demons and exorcism, those of territorial sovereignty and the enemy within, and (for China) those of cannibalism, of self-devouring sacrifice and disorder. The thesis argued is that the norms of ambiguity in images of the enemy within are split under certain political conditions, and it is in those conditions that they are realized on a large scale. The key political condition is the declaration of a state of exception. In the conditions of both cases they produce in the state’s leadership aggravated indifference to its subjects and demonizing extreme violence upon the targets of demonization.

Keywords
- cannibalism
- demonization
- sovereignty
- splitting
- state of exception

I do not suppose it is controversial to assume that every human being has the capacity to hate and fear, and that every cultural environment provides imagery for such hate and fear. The images are often of monstrous, semi-human forms of life. They are always between death and life, but some can be fierce and full of energetic if malign life, others a form of death in life. The two are combined in the extraordinary threat of the sub-human. The hated and feared are often also imagined as extreme forms of imbalance or blockage of bodily intakes and flows, both cause and result. Such imagery is the stuff of rumour. Its transmission and institutionalization are the starting point for an anthropological contribution to political theory, which asks in what circumstances are such images of sub-humanity acted upon and realized?

Take rites of exorcism as a key example of realization. Exorcism is peculiar in that it treats individual cases but also conjures a mass imagery of ghosts and demons. At the most benevolent and ambivalent end of the imagery, rites perform a combination of pity and care as well as extraction and expulsion of an invading spirit to its proper place. Then there is accusation, humiliation and degradation of a person or people identified with invasion. Worse is what I am really concerned with, the same on a
large scale, more in conformity with the imagery of a mass of demons and ghosts: expulsion or extermination of the objects of fear and hatred and of those with whom they are identified. When these objects are identified as a mass and with a population category, exorcism becomes what has been called pogrom, after the way Jewish populations in the Pale of the Russian empire in the 19th century were expelled from their settlements and killed. The 20th century produced a further extreme: programmatic extinction of the population category condemned by rumour of conspiracy and invasion.

I wish to juxtapose two instances of a government of a modern state taking its subjects into a massively lethal project. One instance is, as already indicated, the Nazi Third Reich taking its people to war and attempting to exterminate European Jews. The other is the Maoist Chinese Great Leap Forward and its quasi-repetition in the Cultural Revolution, both accompanied by persecution of those deemed to be class enemies and demonized using older ritual imagery, but neither of them a genocide or even its less lethal form, the expulsion of population categories. I seek to understand both as realizations of images of sub-humanity, many of which have been transmitted from ritually performed acts of exorcism, but extended both in their scale and their imagery by modern political conditions. Here I shall have recourse to images of sovereignty, in a second resort, after exorcism, to a long-established anthropological topic.

Let me end this introduction with a clear statement of the question to which I am seeking answers: what social and cultural circumstances provide the urge to realize ghosts and demons, a threatening form of life between life and death and the means to act on it? The main part of my answer is intolerance of ambiguity, in other words a splitting from a double that is an othered and despised self.

Doubling and splitting

Half of the political condition is an ideologically propagated splitting of what is ambivalent into a projected and repugnant other self and an idealized mission in which the owned self is involved. The other half is a mobilization of the means, including force, to realize that ideology.

In ‘The Other Question’, Homi Bhabha (1994) describes stereotyped images in colonial discourse as a doubling, dividing the self to serve the fantastic desire to be pure in origin and projecting everything else into the colonial other. Doubling entails disavowal. In fact there are two disavowals. One is the refusal to see in the other a replica of the (mixed) self. The second disavowal is a refusal to see the other as the same but different. The repetition of the projection is compelled by disavowal, by the unrelenting pressure to refuse to see, a refusal that seeks security in the assertion of the stereotype as the real. Once the stereotype has been used, offering the
realization of the desire for purity, it produces its own dynamic of compulsive repetition. Disavowal of the human in the sub-human involves a compulsive refusal of similarity. I have found this account of racist imagery and discourse to be indispensable. The fantasy of being pure in origin is obviously not confined to colonial discourse. But I see the need for greater precision. I want to identify the point where ambivalence becomes doubling, or where doubling is still ambivalent and then where it becomes a more severely split disavowal.

I am going to argue that stereotyping is not just imaginary, it is put into practice and realized. It is enabled by what Lifton (1986) calls a moment of technological inertia. The moment of inertia (his metaphor) of contradictory logic splits all reality into polar opposites, such as into good and evil. His examples of contradictory logic, driven on by problem-solving inventiveness of organization and technique, are Nazi bio-ideology and the ideology of nuclear deterrence, of mutually assured destruction. The Nazi logic is that of a biology for enhancing the life of the (German) people by removing from it both the people who are a cancer that is weakening it and the German lives that are not worthy of life. The deterrence logic is readiness to use weapons of mass destruction to prevent use of weapons of mass destruction – to use the current parlance. Both contemplate self-destruction – in the Nazi case, as the deserved failure of the German people to revive themselves. The moment of inertia in both is a techno-logic of strategists (military and political) and their scientists, both inflated by the potency and the grandeur of their schemes. The contradictory logic involves, according to Lifton, a psychological splitting and doubling in the primary agents of the politics and the implementation of that logic. He illustrates a splitting of the persona in his analysis of interviews with Nazi doctors, which he then generalizes in his discussion of genocidal mentality – referring both to Nazi genocide and to the doctrine of mutually assured destruction in the development of nuclear deterrence (Lifton, 1986; Lifton and Markusen, 1990). Lifton points out that ‘splitting’ involves dissociation of ideas from emotions. It is accompanied by disavowal of the consequences of a task, which separates technique from ethics and withdraws empathy from those who will suffer the consequences or who are intended victims. Dissociation that has become normal in the life of a person results in what Lifton calls ‘doubling’, in which the person engaged in a work task is dissociated from the same person at home. Two key examples of the dissociation between the norms of a task and the ethics of a profession in which the same person is engaged are Dr Wirth and Dr Gerstein in Auschwitz. Dr Wirth, as a good doctor, did what he could to improve conditions for prisoners in Auschwitz while, as a good Nazi, he organized selections for the gas chambers. Dr Gerstein, as a good Nazi, helped to develop the Zyklon-B gas and its use in Auschwitz, but, as a good doctor, he risked his life by informing Catholic officials and a Swedish diplomat of the horrors he was perpetrating (Lifton and Markusen, 1990: 195ff).
Applying these concepts to China under Mao’s leadership, the doubling and the split is in the Party and its leader claiming to have sacrificed themselves for the people they profess to serve and expecting sacrifice of life from the people as repayment of the boundless debt it owes to the Party. As I shall argue, doubling and splitting in Maoist China is the Party from the top down substituting itself for the sovereign people and, as in many of Mao’s speeches, proclaiming indifference to the suffering of the people with which it identifies itself, occasioned by scientific policies of advance toward communist abundance via class struggle.

Aggravated indifference and targeted violence in two different histories

Each of the two instances of state violence that I have decided to juxtapose, and improbably to compare, contains both indifference to and targeting of masses of victims. Nazi state violence is, on the one hand, the act of indifferently taking its people into a war that did them immense harm and, on the other hand, eugenic euthanasia building up to an eventual programme of extermination of targeted, pariah populations. The Chinese state violence is a sequence of first targeting Rightists, then creating undifferentiated victims of starvation in an enthusiasm for revolutionary change underlain by fear of being labelled Rightist, and then nine years later targeted violence again. The Nazi case is the more familiar, so I will devote more space to describing the Chinese. But I intend to carry through the contrast between the two, using the same terms of analysis.

The Maoist state of China in 1957–8 speeded collectivization and the close direction of agriculture and industry, mobilizing labour on military lines to accelerate grain and steel production. This was called the Great Leap Forward (Dayuejin). The resulting failures of harvest and wasting of land, trees and iron utensils smelted into useless ingots had the consequence of a famine in which over 30 million died between 1959 and 1961 (Yang, 1996: 37–8). The Chinese Communist Party had created the apparatuses of a command economy and the means to mobilize the labouring population through mass organizations. Cadres at the lowest levels of command obeyed what seemed to them to be superior revolutionary authority and its scientific credentials, despite knowing as farmers that the close-cropping to increase production would not work.

Hunger had been the frequent fate of a Chinese peasant. Images from past famine horrors were repeated in descriptions of circumstances that were peculiar to the time of the Great Leap. For instance, one man who was at the time a local cadre in Quanzhou city told us, 25 years later, in remembered disgust and shame: ‘In mountain areas there was cannibalism. People found human fingernails in dumplings. People taking their food coupons to the mountains were robbed. Cannibalism and robbery!’ But
previous famines were regional and, though its severity varied, this was a nation-wide famine.

The Party-state’s partial responsibility for the nation-wide famine was acknowledged in 1961. But the two acknowledged causes of the famine, natural disaster and state directives, were held apart. Perhaps nature or chance is invoked and kept apart from state responsibility in any political leadership that cannot take into account the long-term consequences of policy decisions but has to adjust to them if it is flexible enough. Flexibility of response to consequential conditions is therefore the main issue. Will it be responsive, or is state leadership so rigidly fixed or dogmatically set that it will not respond or take consequences into account, even when its ‘own’ population is affected? Negative rigidity is the political equivalent of splitting. The Chinese Party-state took two years to respond to the disastrous consequences of the Great Leap Forward. In spring 1959, Mao managed to isolate his main critic, Peng Dehuai, who had pointed out what Mao also knew, that people were already starving. Instead of reducing the production targets as he had intended when he first received reports of starvation, Mao – with the collusion of most of the other leaders, including those whom Mao later denounced in the Cultural Revolution – intensified the campaign for higher production figures and backed it up with a campaign against critics at all levels, called the campaign against Anti-Right-Opportunists. Eventually, in 1960, starvation was so prevalent and obvious that in 1961 the Party reversed the policy and decollectivized agricultural production. As Yang Dali (1996) has argued, this was the precursor to the economic reforms that occurred after Mao’s death in 1976. But in the meantime, those who had led the divesting of collective to household production were accused, with some justification, of building a great state bureaucracy and encouraging a restoration of capitalism. Eventually they, in turn and with some justification too, accused revolutionary collectivizers of slowing production and engaging in a dogma of class struggle. But before their criticism prevailed, they were made into objects of condemnation during the Cultural Revolution.

Those who suffered famine were not given labels. They were not victims of a purge, as were those accused of opposing Party-led advance. The sick and the dead were the knowable but unheeded consequences of political enthusiasm. What remains from the time of the starvation and of the Cultural Revolution, however, is an imagery of horror: of self-consumption, cannibalism and excess. Cannibalism and excess will be my third anthropological example of the realization of sub-humanity, after exorcism and sovereignty.

I am concerned with the aggravated indifference to the starving and the excessive violence perpetrated on the targeted populations. I do not consider the demonization of enemies in wars of defence against invasion and occupation, though what I have to say about internal demons is obviously relevant to civil war. Wars of defence and the commemoration of
soldiers fallen in battle are prominent in every culture. I am dealing here with the much more problematic domestic victims of their own state’s violence. I argue that the main modern political condition that induces or reinforces a propensity to project and label a population sanctioned for indifference, or as a threat, is the declaration of a state of emergency, which abolishes procedures of accountability to the people or encourages (or contracts out) mass reprisal by revolutionary or patriotic force. The declaration also seeks to make visible a half-visible enemy or threat and to expel it – render it really invisible. The most powerfully assertive declaration of emergency (often using the word ‘war’) is by the most territorial and the most populist or mass-based authority, namely that of a state but in the name of a people that transcends the state. An enemy of this people and claim to statehood is most thoroughly to be deterritorialized, dislocated, extracted, flushed out, made visible and then no longer to be seen in a sovereign territory and its people. For aggravated indifference to its own people, I shall argue that the prime condition is a splitting of the self-professed leadership of the people, that steels and sacrifices itself for the people but also splits itself from the people, treating them as if they owe their lives to the leadership and must repay the leadership with total, active and heroic loyalty.

**Humanity and civilization**

The notion of a state’s sovereignty, as distinct from a monarch’s claim of divine right over loyal subjects, has as its subject a population of citizens and as its object a population to husband and manage. Excluded categories are just objects, but the people are both object and subject. Besides the human propensity to fear and hate, and the imagery for that combination of fear and hatred, this kind of state will bring into consideration scientific and philosophical notions of humanity. These notions are more specifically historical, and are inherent in the politics of the Enlightenment that also gave birth to philosophical and empirical anthropology. They add to ideas that were already there in folk-tales, myths and rituals, and the idea of a natural nation, which is that of a relativized but universal humanity. The new knowledge, a natural history of humanity, produced ideas of sub-humanity justifying slavery to Christians and to the Enlightenment notion of freedom. In the states of Europe and the settler states of their empires, the result was the categorizing of peoples in the context of a rivalry among nations for sovereign territory that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was described as a race war in the struggle for survival and supremacy. The categorization had religious loyalties attached to it, partly subsumed by the later notions of ethnic cultures. And these had their origins in the religious wars that gave rise to the Treaty of Westphalia that is said to be a foundation of the international system. Each nation was
multinational in that it had more than one religious confession and histories of ‘minorities’ within it, each potentially an outsider within. This is as true of China as it is of Europe, but here we come upon a contrast.

Even though its civilizational influence has become part of the traditions of neighbours, such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam, the Chinese state is not, like Germany, close to nations on its borders that are equally strong rivals for the same civilizational and religious visions. Germany was the inheritor, as were its neighbour states, to the wars of religion – in particular the nearly 50 years of war between Catholics and Protestants called the Thirty Years War that ended in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, but was then followed by continuing wars and civil wars that combined religious affiliation with the rivalry of monarchs (Davies, 1996: 563–9). The sovereignty of states to declare their people’s religious confession soon became the division of those states, internally as well as from each other, according to an explosive mix of confession and nationality, the various national denominations of Protestant churches, and the various national and sub-national populations of Roman Catholics, and later the various nationalities of the eastern Orthodox Church, and the division of all these from various denominations of Islam.

Wars of religion on Chinese lands were either wars to establish a new Chinese dynasty, such as the Taiping for its brief empire in the 19th century, or else rebellions against imperial rule, such as Muslim rebellions in the far west, also in the 19th century. But the reformers of the late imperial Chinese state concentrated on self-strengthening. They did not seek conquest either of faith or of sovereignty. The imperial state had only sought incorporation into its civilizational sphere of inclusion and its oecumene. Now, as a nation, that inclusion has become a fierce retention of what is taken to be an inherited territorial integrity. Its disasters as an empire-becoming-a-nation, and then as a republican nation, have been either those of neglect, corruption and weakness or of overzealous self-strengthening and suppression of anything taken to threaten territorial integrity, exacerbated by incursion and invasion by other imperial occupiers.

Hitler and his party were certainly self-strengtheners too. For ‘self’ they picked up an already nationalistic mythology of the German volk and the messianic traditions of Protestant peasant rebellions and turned them into a racialization of the masses through great ceremonies and stirring oratory and a programme of eugenics to strengthen the race. They did this by heightening the sense of a people threatened by internal as well as external enemies plotting against it, identical but opposite: the finance capitalism of Jews and the opposite threat of Jewish Bolsheviks, as well as the under-classes and sub-peoples that were pictured as inferior, parasitic, degenerate and lumpen.3 Hitler’s Nazi Party combined some of the ideological elements of a failed but very powerful socialist revolutionary movement with German nationalism that had been humiliated in the First World War.
Furthermore, it incorporated the bureaucracies of what had been, under Bismarck, the first welfare state. Hitler’s state became a Party-state that protected its industries, took on huge public works and the industries of armament and military recruitment and training, continuing the process of ending inflation and restoring full employment that had already begun. At the same time, it enslaved the labour of millions of the populations it conquered in central Europe. Most distinctively, Hitler’s self-strengthening was exalted as the purification and self-realization of a race, threatened by the poisons of weakening agents.

Mao’s Communist Party led a successful socialist revolution. Like Hitler’s Nazi Party, it took an extremely vulnerable economy and mass misery into security of employment and income. But it did this through building an entirely new state, based on the Soviet example but with the crucial addition of a policy of popular mobilization through mass organizations. There is very little in it of the previous nationalist republic. And, in sharp contrast to Hitler’s programmes, restoration of employment and income was achieved without a programme of exterminating and enslaving whole, racialized, populations. Instead there was and is a gulag of ‘reform through labour’, a proportionally much smaller slave labour force of criminals, including those held to be opposed to the state.

The Chinese Communist Party won a prolonged civil war, interrupted by a war against Japanese invasion and occupation. The threats to the Chinese Communist Party-state were deemed to be those of class enemies. What might have been different races were instead treated as backward nationalities in a history of class struggle. Leaving aside the scale of horror suffered by both peoples, I think the contrasting predispositions – of nationalist rivalry for civilizational scope and its racialization on one hand, and of self-strengthening civilizational renewal taking on a national cloak, and, under the CCP, emphasizing class on the other – go some way to explaining the emergency states that committed such different kinds of state violence in Germany and in China.

**The inside outsider and sovereignty: European targeted violence and the modern state**

Here I introduce an anthropologically and philosophically informed thesis by Giorgio Agamben (1998, 1999) on sovereignty that bases itself on the notion of bare life and Western ontology. It is a philological thesis on the Roman root of a form of sovereignty and its capacity for demonization. He treats it as if it were universal, but I will treat it, like the national rivalries for the truths of European civilizations, as a marking out of the nature of state violence among the states of Europe and what were its colonial states, while remaining sceptically alert to its claim to be a universal theory of state sovereignty.
For anthropology the subject of sovereignty appears most often in the study of kingship and rituals of succession. These rituals, the world over, pivot on similar and crucial dualities, between the person of kingship and the person ruling, the throne and the body, or the figure of twins mobilized in rites of succession in which a king is killed and at the same time persists in another body or a replica of the body. The point I want to draw from these studies is the close association of sacred authority with the gift of life that transcends the actual lives of bodies. The doubling upon which Agamben dwells, and so do I, is the doubling of the king into the gift of life and the dying body or the corpse. But to these images are added the condition of the modern state that has succeeded the divine sovereign, which is to say the transfer of sovereignty from a monarch’s divine sanction to that of a state’s claim to popular will. Foucault had good reason to name the politics of the modern state ‘bio-politics’ or the politics of life. Its institutions are a tracery of knowledge and social capacity concerned with the management of reproducing the life (bodies and subjectivities) of a population in a territory, regulated by a state and its laws. This is where Agamben makes his intervention. Foucault never considered the concentration camp as a key institution of bio-politics. Agamben’s book remedies that omission by return to a classical, Roman conception of sovereignty.

It specifies sovereignty as the exceptional power to banish what was inside to an externalized space within the territory of sovereign power. In his concept, sovereignty is the awful asymmetry of two figures, each one of which is both outside and within. One is the sovereign, doubled into life-provider and a body that dies, the other is a figure of bare life without any political entitlement whatsoever. According to Agamben the most primitive sovereignty, in the sense of first and foremost, logically and probably historically, long before the formation of the modern state in Europe, is the power to ban a subject. Like so many philosophers, when he writes of apparent universals he is of course referring only to the philology of European civilization. The Roman tradition that, he claims, has become the basis for modern sovereignty is the asymmetry of supreme power and abysmal powerlessness. In Roman law someone cast into the condition of utter vulnerability by the emperor was _homo sacer_. Here _sacer_ precisely did not specify a sacrificial object. It did not refer to a holy person. Neither did it point to a person to be punished by one of the ceremonies of execution. _Homo sacer_ was one who could be killed at will without the perpetrator being considered guilty of the crime of murder, and whose killing was not a sacrifice.

Agamben claims that the _sacer_ in _homo sacer_ refers to bare life, but not to the ambivalence of both taboo and breach of taboo that is the power and the danger of the sacred that he learned from anthropology. But he could have noted that ‘sacred’ in this powerful sense serves well as a concept of precisely the sovereign authority that has the power to ban, which is to make someone _homo sacer_. The sovereign is powerfully and dangerously
above rules of law. More crucially, there remains a similar ambivalence in
the *homo sacer*. I do not think that he can deny that the handling of *homo sacer*, a figure of complete vulnerability and debasement, is polluting and frightening. But I hold on to his main point that the asymmetry of sovereign/*homo sacer* is much more extreme than the sacred mix of purity and pollution. It is more like that of the king at death: the asymmetry between the power of life and the powerlessness of the body that is almost a corpse. It is the sovereign power over life and the power to abandon life to death. This may be true of all sovereignties, but of course they will differ according to their different cosmologies of ‘life’. With the addition of the monotheistic stresses of the Reformation and Counter-reformation the asymmetry becomes a doubling between the Godly and the Satanic, or between the Truthful and the betrayers and enemies of the Truth. Turned into a religious secularity this becomes a polarization between true (human) Being and the rootless polluters of Being.

For many Nazi ideologues, Jews were not even a race, since races belong somewhere, and belonging was everything. Jews had no place. Or, as Supreme Party Judge Walther Buch wrote in *Deutsche Justiz* (German Justice, 21 Oct. 1938): ‘The Jew is not a human being. He is an appearance of putrescence [in the German people].’ The imagery of the parasite – the rat, the cockroach, the excrescence – is the preferred sub-humanity in anti-semitic cartoons and stories, realized in the brutal confinement of the rounded-up Jewish populations and their starvation.

I value Agamben’s concept of sovereignty as a key to thinking about the modern state’s capacity for both aggravated indifference and targeted violence. It is already there, potentially, in the modern state’s prime object, which is the realization of the life of a population that counts as its people and its legitimacy. The modern state’s power of exception is particularly lethal just because it is a decision of a government of life. The decision to declare an exception is taken for the sake of a people’s own future, in which the people are expendable in ridding them of a hindrance or threat to their advancement. The exception to normal order declared for the sake of a population’s life can be a marginal condition, but it is one that can also be generalized to make anyone in a population a threat to its life. The global dissemination of the nation-state will in each case have bred a different politics out of different political, religious and philosophical traditions of sovereignty and images of life and humanity. For instance, banishment and internal exile under the Chinese imperial dynasties meant hard labour in frontier regions (Waley-Cohen, 1991). There was nothing equivalent to *homo sacer*. Neither is there a justification of God or a preoccupation with ontology in Chinese philosophy before translations into Chinese of the philosophy written in European languages. Chinese conceptions of humanity and of life are, to cut a very long discourse very short, based on responsive relations, not on intrinsic being.

Instead, the imagery of inhumanity and of sub-humanity in China
mixes ritual categories of monstrosity – demonic monsters of great power – with ritual categories of pitiable but predatory ghosts and their animal equivalents, not Satanic but something much more like werewolves and vampires. Among the animal equivalents are dogs, turtles, goats and snakes, all of them images of vile sexual propensities; monstrously inhuman animals such as wolves and tigers who turn humans into slave-like domestic animals, such as cows and horses; parasites, such as the five toxic insects; and, most ambivalent of all, fox-spirits nurturing themselves on human breath, skulls and effusions and appearing as beautiful women. Fox-spirits could also be worshipped as protectors, as could tigers and predatory ghosts.7

**Sacrifice and excess**

Ghosts, in the liturgy of the Daoist or Buddhist expert conducting rites for the forgotten and the neglected, are to be cared for and put into their proper place. They are powerful, fearsome and, at the same time, pitiable. Inside, the neglected dead are cared for *en masse* as forgotten ancestors. The threatening outsiders’ proper place on the ground is outside, on borders, sides of roads and streams, or wastelands between settlements. As with the marginalized Jews and the anti-semitic imagery of the merchant, there is room in such in-between places for the ambivalence of an amoral force and for something that is both vengeful and pitiable, or both admired for their magical powers and feared. The denizens of the in-between of human society are similarly sought, pitied and feared: beggars, prostitutes, tramps, tinkers, bandits or the mad. The imagery of those at the front-line of the control and command of demons and ghosts is vivid, of fierce, bestial features on human but immensely strong bodies. In China, this imagery of loyal and protective ghosts and demons is the most human part of an imagery of an archaic imperial command. So, in its most benign state, exorcism is simply the putting of demons and ghosts into their proper and ambivalent place, and that includes the use of their force for possibly benign results among the living.

All this persists into present-day China, in revitalized temples and their rituals after their almost total suppression. But while they were suppressed, some of that imagery was transposed into an emergency of declared class warfare. In that transposition counter-revolutionaries and the remnants of defeated classes were turned into the living dead, a border condition between death and life and of invisible threat. The Party newspaper urged red youth to ‘sweep away all ox-monsters and snake-demons’ and in Fujian the Great Leap campaign to increase production included urging people to treat farm tools as sword and spear to frighten the Earth god and startle the Dragon King to death (Fujian, 2001: 152–4). Farmers responded in kind. Forced off the land by beatings to build a reservoir in the poorest part
of the province and lacking food, they described the reservoir as the King of Purgatory’s Commune (Fujian, 2001: 195–8). But of course in official propaganda such images were not of something between the historical and the eternal (cosmological monsters, protector gods with individuated stories of their past lives as well as their deeds after death, demons who are the ghosts of past lives). Instead, the eternity of death was turned into a teleology, in which something from the past, a survival, threatens to reverse or block an historical destiny and mission: the creation of socialist modernity by the Chinese people. Michael Schoenhals (1994) has traced the phrase ‘ox-monsters and snake-demons’ to a speech Mao addressed to a propaganda conference in 1957, referring to the critics of the Party who were to be invited on stage, as if they were the evil characters in opera, during the campaign to let a Hundred Flowers (of opinion and criticism) bloom, only to be denounced and labelled as Rightists the next year, exposed in order to be destroyed as ‘poisonous weeds’ by a shocked People. They were not to be treated as human, but as obstacles to the progress of humanity in general and the Chinese People in particular. Campaigns to wipe out such obstacles, categories of targeted violence, had been conducted from the first years of Communist enclaves before the establishing of total Party state power on the mainland, and they culminated in the Cultural Revolution.

A different teleology, the project of bringing about the German race as a destiny of action and vitality, transposed the imagery of anti-Semitism and of the brutality of the semi-oriental East of the Slavs into a science of racial hygiene. In this projection of a purified German race, Jews were at once without true Being and a threat to it, and Slavs backward and dispensable but a formidable and threatening force. The principles of Leadership and Will had already been remarked by Hermann Rauschning (1939 [1938]) as the project of creating a German super-race that was knowingly projected at the risk of the German people and of total destruction, including self-destruction.8 Immediately upon winning power electorally, the Nazi government issued an emergency decree for the protection of the people and state, suspending normal procedures of legislation, and proceeded to do two things simultaneously. It prepared for war. At the same time it began a programme of protection of the people. Two parts of this programme stand out as examples of the modern condition of homo sacer. One was eugenic killing and sterilization. The other was internment or ghettoization of enemies of the German people that it represented as a racial body, including the reduction of Jewry to the pauperized parasites and criminals portrayed in the imagery of virulent anti-Semitism. Gypsies were already kept out and reduced some distance away, as they still are in most of Europe. Now they would suffer the same extreme debasement as did the Jews. The imagery of pauper and menace long preceded its Nazi elaboration and realization. The Nazi propagators of such imagery acted upon it so as to produce in reality the social state of sub-humanity that it pictures:
animal categories of disease, threat or brute strength and stupidity. It is an imagery that was available and used in polite as well as in beer-hall society, and it has its equivalents now in contrasts between high and low forms of human life that feed the racisms of the world, but in this extreme case it was realized first in confinement and starvation, then in extermination and labour camps.

In China, the Cultural Revolution of 1966 came within a regime that had relied on mass mobilization campaigns for the implementation of policy. It was a regime that had placed little reliance on due procedures of law since the Great Leap Forward of 1958. But in 1966 the ministries of state, the administration of a command economy, and the main central apparatus of planning and of mass mobilization, the Communist Party, all became objects of rivalrous mass mobilization of school and university students, workers and eventually even peasant farmers under the inspiration of the ultimate leader and iconic figure of Mao Zedong surrounded by a small group intent on renewing the revolutionary impetus of social and personal transformation, suspending what rule of law there had been but maintaining the armed forces intact and unassailed.

Under Mao, revolution and the discovery and humiliation of its enemies became routinized into political rituals. This was not genocide, it was a class-historical not a racial demonization. But it was a split within a people. Such a split could be generalized, not just targeted. Members of the people, including the revolutionary classes, were to make sacrifices to themselves and to purge the bad parts of themselves. Claude Lefort (1986: ch. 9) describes this ‘totalitarianism’ as a denial of a division, a disavowal (as I would put it) that needs constant renewal because the division constantly recurs. The division is between a class of what he calls egocrats (Party bureaucrats) and people. The disavowal is put into effect by means of the image of the social body and its division between people and the enemy within that is to be externalized or purged (1986: 297–8). The totality breaks into a whole and its three parts: on the one hand the leader, representative of the whole and demanding sacrifice by the people (sub-divided into class categories) for the people, and the purged parasitical part (also sub-divided). In Maoist China, the leadership declared historical class enemies to be a danger to a (dogmatically declared) state of near Communism, which is near realization in a time beyond history, the time of a new universality of humanity concentrated in one, territorially bounded people. Revolution is historical, but to declare it to be on the verge of a state beyond history is possible only by denial of continuity, a splitting of the past from the present and ultimately a splitting away from all history.

Racial and national-ethnic categories are available and used in defining the Chinese people as at once cultural and advanced, and minorities as backward. Chinese usage includes many of the tropes of romanticization of the natural and, on the other hand, of low social, technical and educational quality that the civilizing missions of European empires also propagated.
But in China, ethnic and racial categories were not mobilized in defining who are the enemies of the people. The conspiracy of capitalist exploitation and counter-revolution was not identified with a racial category of world conspirators (the modern anti-semite’s Jew) but an internal and external conspiracy of counter-revolutionaries and revisionists. During the Cultural Revolution, so-called ‘bad elements’ of enemy classes, counter-revolutionaries and revisionists were kept in a visible and constant state of degradation and bowed humiliation in every village. There seems to be a parallel here with Jews stigmatized with yellow stars, reduced to misery and rags, visions of debasement in the cities of the Third Reich. But the difference is that Chinese political prisoners were debased as, at least nominally, part of a treatment for reform: the possibility that deeds could overcome the counter-revolutionary and bad-class past and its bloodline. They were worked to death in many instances, but not with the ultimate licence to exterminate them as lives, only as a force or a class.

On the other hand, there was a strange reprise of the worst scenes of famine: the eating of humans. In the factional battles of 1967 and 1968 into which the Cultural Revolutionary attack on capitalist revision and bureaucracy collapsed, in the south-western province of Guangxi several cases of cannibalism occurred (Yue, 1999: 229–37 assessing the reports of Zheng Yi, 1993). Elsewhere the beatings and humiliations killed obstacles to the people, or drove them to suicide. Here, in Guangxi, the zealous violence went to a further extreme: open feasting on their flesh. The cases were few in number within the total of those killed in the particularly fierce factional fighting in the midst of which they occurred. But I want to argue that they are illustrative, as an extreme illustrates that out of which it extends, the extreme of a self-strengthening movement to ultimate advancement.

In Chinese, as in European languages, cannibalism is a sign of extreme barbarity, attributed to ‘raw’ savages at the borders of civilization. But in military actions against the savages, the Chinese, like Europeans, could be as savage as their projections upon others. In Taiwan in 1892–3, military men sold the flesh of the ‘savages’ they killed in markets, where it was bought and eaten in the belief that their flesh was medicinal for strength and courage (Davidson, 1903: 254–5). But its complementary opposite is not the self-sacrifice of Christ for mankind or of the soldier elite for their race or country, but the feeding of their flesh by a son or daughter to save a father’s life – self-sacrifice for filial loyalty, for the reproduction of a line. The most popular image among these is Guanyin, the most popular salvation god, a bodhisattva. In her legend, as the Princess Miaoshan, she is the paragon of fleshly self-sacrifice, putting out her eyes and cutting off her arms to make the only medicine that will cure her father of a fatal illness. With this willing sacrifice as a ‘person without anger’, even though her father had disowned her because she refused to marry and have children in favour of a Buddhist devotion, she left the world. She is deified and worshipped as a continuation of her filial sacrifice in service to humanity.
She is portrayed as having a thousand eyes to see suffering and a thousand arms for alleviating it. A much more male heroism is the story of the deified and fierce protector, a general, Xu Yuan, loyal to his emperor as he would be filial to his father, holding out in one of the last cities besieged by a rebel general. The loyal troops are reduced to killing and eating their own children. The general is so ashamed of still maintaining a concubine while his soldiers eat their children that he kills her to feed the loyal troops and they all follow his example by killing and eating women, followed by old men. But even after this extreme act of heroic survival they have to surrender (Feuchtwang, 2001: 196–7). With this story, recorded in the official history of the Later Tang Dynasty, and simplified in the stories of the god protecting territories in southern Fujian and northern Taiwan to this day, self-sacrifice and self-devouring degeneracy come very close. But they are still divided by the difference between heroism and shame. The condition in the siege is that of starvation, but the eating of children is still portrayed as the last resort of those defending order, not as a shameful manifestation of extreme disorder.

In the politicized language of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao, the language of sacrifice was widely used to describe the relationship between the Party and the people for whom it acted, the people owing loyalty to the Party whose cadres had made great sacrifices for the people. But in the Great Leap famine, indifference to the people by the leadership of the people making sacrifices for the people became indifference to the shame among the people, including the shame of survivors swapping and eating their dead children (Becker, 1996: 139). These in turn are the complementary opposite of stories of cadres going round to houses to dig out hidden stores of food for the collective canteens and further rumours of the same cadres in charge of granaries feasting secretly. Shame and secrecy keeps them separate. But in the case of Cultural Revolution cannibalism, self-devouring shame is turned into heroic cannibalism in the eating of the enemy: victorious factions steeling themselves in heroic and self-sacrificial efforts for the Revolution in defeating and then eating members of the opposite faction labelled bad elements or counter-revolutionaries. Hearts, livers and penises were eaten as acts of boldness and as a means of becoming even bolder. I do not (yet) know whether there is an imaginable precedent for this in Chinese myth and ritual, but it seems to me to be a perverse, reversed, acting out of monstrosity. The monstrosity projected onto the opponent is turned into a self-strengthening prophylactic monstrous heroism.

Cultural Revolution cannibalism took to an extreme the pathology of self-strengthening. In local protection of fragments of sovereign territory, borderlands, such as riversides, are no longer spaces of doubt. The riverside in Guangxi was where bodies were dismembered for eating, the discarded corpses found later far down river in Hong Kong (Gittings, 1996: 194). Borderlands of ambiguity are split into an amplification of small
differences (factions); petty rivalries turned into revolutionary class differences in which the other is an already defeated but at the same time monstrous danger. In the pathology of imbalance, of simultaneous depletion and excess, the dangerous other is devoured as if this will strengthen the self (Farquhar, 2002: ch. 3). This occurs in China as a country known to its Communist historians as a country of famine to be rescued as a country of Revolutionary self-sacrifice speeding to abundance. What was kept apart by secrecy and shame – heroic self-sacrifice at the expense of children, women and the old on one hand, and the shameful cannibalism of the starving on the other – here becomes brazen and open cannibalistic self-strengthening.

The German equivalent of local territorial fragments of sovereignty was identification with Heimat. Every citizen-subject of the Third Reich was issued with a German Unity-family-line Book (Deutsches Einheits-Familienstammbuch) in which to record marriages, births and family tree rooted in one of the places of German heritage (Heimat). The book was prefaced by two printed essays, on genealogical research and on the family in the service of racial hygiene. War was waged to bring into a Greater Germany all the Heimat of the German race in central Europe. At the same time, ordinary Germans had to conduct shameful acts of enslavement, guarding slave labour and slaughtering dangerous, polluting races. They were shameful at the time, not just afterwards in the post-war German republics. In a speech to the Higher SS and Police in Posen on 4 October 1943, to mark his taking over the Ministry of the Interior, Heinrich Himmler, Commissar for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germandom, said:

Most of you men know what it is like to see 100 corpses, side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stood fast through this and – except for cases of human weakness – to have stayed decent, that has made us hard. This is an unwritten and never-to-be written page of glory in our history, for we know how difficult it would be for us if today – under bombing raids and the hardships and deprivations of war – we were still to have the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators and inciters. . . . We had the moral right, we had the duty towards our people to destroy this people that wanted to destroy us. . . . We have carried out this most difficult of tasks in a spirit of love for our people. And we have suffered no harm in our inner being, our soul, our character. (in Burleigh, 2000: 660–1)

The unpleasant, hardening task for heroes of human decency included the driving to death of other living corpses than those of Jews. But the mass killing of Jews was the particularly gruesome task of racial hygiene that Himmler singled out, because of the particularly polluting danger that Jews constituted. In this case self-strengthening did not include self-sacrifice that could devour the enemy: pollution could not be turned into occult strength. It was the same split, only in this case that of steeling through revulsion. Another suffering, of the hardships of food and other shortages in the last years of the war into which the Nazi Party had taken its people, was also to be endured. Complaint and distrust of the news and the lies of
leaders were policed, hiding the truth from a people already in danger of failing its heroic mission of racial self-realization in war.

Conclusion

I have put forward an anthropological theory of the mass realization of sub-humanity, of a state reducing much of its population to a state of bare life, by the political condition for splitting. I have illustrated it with two very different cases. The most vivid images of sub-humanity and their realization are applied to populations targeted for exclusion and elimination, internal objects of fear and hatred. To see how they work I have mobilized anthropological theories of sovereignty and exorcism, though these are not sufficient in themselves. They require in addition the political conditions of inducement.

I have also signalled, in the same political conditions, what I have called ‘aggravated indifference’ to the population upon which a state relies as its subjects. For this I resorted to another split in ideology, of political self-sacrifice by a leadership for its subjects from the demanded self-sacrifice of the subjects for its leadership. The political and economic conditions for both aggravated indifference and demonization are processes of crisis and social movement that lead to political splitting, in which the ambiguity of pity and fear, life and bare life, entertained at the same time about the same image and its realization, is abolished and turned into a purifying or self-strengthening self and that which threatens it. The crises of political economy are further induced by a political leadership that declares a state of exception in a modern state that has as its project the improvement of life.

I presented two very different cases of a self-strengthening state project. Nazi Germany’s project was the territorial unification, purification and realization of the German people as a heroic race. Maoist China’s was the revolutionary advancement of humanity in general and the Chinese people in particular. For Nazi Germany, the targeted population was what threatened the German race with degeneration. For Maoist China, the targeted population was that of remnants of the class enemies of a past being surpassed by the revolutionary force of the Chinese people. The aggravated indifference of the leadership for its own population was, in the case of Nazi Germany, the Party leading its people to fight for its heroic mission and, in its failure, not deserving to be spared the death, destruction and humiliation of defeat. In the case of Maoist China, the people was a resource wasteful in its own salvation, its own future. The precondition for both was a split between the representer, the leadership, and the represented. The leadership was itself split between ideological self-idealization and cynical pragmatism in the use of force and terror to ensure its population’s assumed loyalty. The imagery of targeted elimination leaks into aggravated indifference. In the case of Maoist China, self-sacrifice for revolutionary
victory turned into starvation, the monstrous images of hungry ghosts and shameful cannibalism for survival among the led population and, for self-professed revolutionary (actually factional) heroes, the brazen cannibalism of its defeated enemies. In the case of Nazi Germany, the most self-sacrificial heroism of the leadership was kept secret and reserved for the repulsive task of eliminating Jews.

However different the available imageries for demonization of the enemy within, certain characteristics of demonization are widespread. One is the double of life, which is of death in life, bodies that look human but are monstrous or are like animals, microbes or machines without souls. Another is the sexualizing and desecrating of organs and substances that debase and pollute but are at the same time violated, and, in the Chinese but not the German case, devoured as ways of joining the company of the bold. When these images are realized in a modern state and its declaration of emergency, a dynamic of violence is applied to an enemy within, and what ensues is a terrible escalation. It starts from a graded withdrawal of social opportunity, goes on to confinement and deprivation, and so to slaughter. It starts from the state of emergency, of a war on the enemy within, causing the split, moving from ambiguity and borderlands to a more fearful and violent projection. In its course new images and their realization are produced, the creation in reality of new figures of life in death and death in life.

Notes

1 For instance, knowing there was a shortage of food and having read reports of peasants having to eat roots, in February 1959 Mao said the peasants were eating rice at night and ordered the use of force to search their households for secret grain stores, saying: ‘There is no Communist spirit in them! Peasants are after all peasants. That’s the only way they can behave’ (Chang and Halliday, 2005: 446).

2 From interviews conducted by my colleague Wang Mingming and I in March 2004 in the prefecture and city of Quanzhou, southern Fujian.

3 After writing this, I found the following quotation, which summarizes decades of historical questioning by Dan Diner (2003: 78): ‘What makes the Holocaust so exceptional is the fact that in a very dense period of time [its culmination being 1942–4], three or four different historical currents – anti-semitism, ethnic cleansing, racial warfare [including the racialization of class] and the practices of euthanasia, were fused . . .’

4 Maurice Bloch (1989) has theorized these dualities as, on the one hand, eternal order and fertility that is a gift of sacred power held to be a natural virtue and a treasure and, on the other hand, the conferring of that power on the king by tribute. The gift of life is already there, precious and indispensable, yet at the same time it has to be found and recognized in the king in order to exist. His point is that the gift of life is an ideology because it disavows the gift that confers and constitutes its legitimacy.

5 ‘Within this racialized imaginary, the Jews are not so much an inferior race as an
antirace, responsible for historical processes that are profoundly dangerous and destructive to the social “health” of other peoples – a threat to life itself’ (Postone, 2003: 89; original italics).


7 For this menagerie I have relied on Kang (2006: ch. 2) and Wasserstrom and Wang (1996). Warm thanks to Dr Kang for sending me a late draft of the chapter.

8 For instance, Rauschning (1939 [1938]: 95) notes a passage from Hitler’s manifesto Mein Kampf, deleted from later editions, in which he writes: ‘the German has not the faintest notion of the way the nation has to be swindled if one wants mass support’. J.P. Stern concludes his study of the Hitler and the Nazi leadership principle of will (1975: 222–3) with a high-level witness to Hitler’s suicidal devotion to ‘brutal struggle to the uttermost’. The speeches of high Nazi leaders during the last weeks of the war repeat the same combination of willingness to sacrifice the glorified German people and themselves in their failure to live up to their chosen destiny (Fest, 2005: 55–6).

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