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A Plea for a Discursive Approach to Emotions.

The example of the French airmen's relation to violence

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Violence theory; air power; Foucault's discourse theory; sociology of emotions

Abstract

Emotions are often said to be a hard case for empirical analysis because of their 'intimate' nature. This paper argues that this view stems from a misleading view of the real nature of emotions. As Butler recently put it, emotions are inseparable from the social 'frames' which constitute them. Hence, it is possible to by-pass the epistemological problem of the study of emotions by studying these frames. I make this point by elaborating on an inquiry into the 'frames' which mediate French airmen's emotional relation to violence. I analyse their emotional approach to violence in three steps: (1) data collection, (2) an analysis of the language that they use when talking about their victims; (3) an investigation of the routinized procedures which precede their lethal actions.

Introduction

Many IR students are reluctant to study emotions. This diffidence does not stem from the view that emotions play no role in international politics¹. Indeed, history teaches us that emotions often impact on international politics. Think, for instance, of the weight of revengeful feelings in the century-old Franco-German antagonism (Delori, 2015) or the role of hatred and racism in many genocides (Mosse, 2000). In fact, the reason why many IR students have reservations about studying emotions seems to be more epistemological than empirical: they conceive of emotions as important but impalpable or unobjectifiable phenomena. This assessment often goes along with an individualistic representation of the body. The latter is presented as an envelope which separates the individual 'self' from the social space. Following this approach, those emotions that 'move'² human bodies are said to come from within and the social context can only influence their expression. Hence, emotions are seen as good objects of study for psychologists and biologists but not for social scientists and, *a fortiori*, for students of international politics.

The argument developed in this chapter is that this reluctance to study emotions disappears if one admits - following the recent Foucauldian turn in the study of emotions (Butler, 2004, 2010; Fassin, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Fierke, 2013; MacLeish, 2013; Weizman, 2012) - that emotions are pure social or historical constructs. Judith Butler put forward this idea by arguing that emotions are not 'pre-discursive' (Butler, 2010, p. 7), meaning that they are fashioned by the intersubjective 'frames' which constitute social reality. This Foucauldian approach to emotions is an invitation to go beyond the dualism between nature and culture, body and soul, feelings and emotions³, etc. (Foucault, 2001 (1994)). It has one fortunate practical consequence: the realization that one does not need to study emotions *per se* - i.e. the actual biological phenomena which move human bodies - to understand their power and effectiveness. A parallel can be drawn with those sociologists of memory who do not study memory *per se* but, rather, the 'social frames' (Halbwachs, 1975, 1925) which constitute it: history books, memorials, personal objects which carry family memories, etc. (Lavabre, 1994).

I will substantiate this point by relying on an empirical study on the emotional relation to violence of French fighter-bomber jet airmen. The work of Western airmen has changed since the development of the 'new Western way of war' (Shaw 2006). They fly at altitudes where their enemies have no chance to inflict any damage on them. To a certain extent, their job is not very different from the job of drone operators: they kill at a distance. Hence, the first objective of my study was to understand what emotions 'move' their body as they perform this peculiar act: killing people outside any logic of 'self-defence' (Kaufman, 2009).

Following Butler (2010), I will call 'frames of war' those fragments of 'discourse' (in the Foucauldian sense of the term) which fashion and regulate the airmen's emotional relation to violence. I will show that two frames of war impact on their emotional relationship with violence: the language that they

¹ I am grateful to Maeva Clément and Eric Sangar for their comments on a previous version of this text.

² The words 'emotion' and 'move' have the same etymological roots.

³ Some authors who take for granted the aforementioned dualism conceive of emotions as social expressions of personal feelings.

use when talking about their lethal actions, and the routinized procedures that they use when they drop bombs and kill.

I will argue, more precisely, that these frames of war fashion an original emotion/violence nexus. Contrary to soldiers in the First World War (Audouin-Rouzeau, 2008), these pilots and navigators do not really hate the people that they kill. In this sense, the paradigm of racist violence hardly applies. Nor do they fully reify their victims as in the famous paradigm of bureaucratic violence popularized by Arendt in her study of the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 1963). Rather, they remind one of a character pictured by Tocqueville in *Democracy, Revolution and Society*: Madame de Sévigné. Tocqueville argues that Madame de Sévigné does not hate anybody and that she is not indifferent to the suffering of distant others either. Madame de Sévigné's specificity lies in the fact that she cannot experience compassion on a democratic basis. In Tocquevilian terms, she is driven by a selective 'economy of pity' (Tocqueville, 1980 (1835), p. 105). In other words, she grants some positive value to all lives (in the sense that she does not hate nor reify anybody) but cannot experience as much pity, sympathy or compassion for a peasant or a bourgeois as for a fellow aristocrat. Now, my point is that fighter-bomber pilots are like Madame de Sévigné. They neither hate nor despise anybody. However, they do not grant the same (positive) value to all lives. Consequently, they calculate that it is sometimes necessary to 'kill' or 'let die' some people so that some other people with greater value can 'live' (Foucault, 1997 (1976), p. 214). I will draw upon two Foucauldian students of current Western wars - Eyal Weizman and Judith Butler (Butler, 2010; Weizman, 2012) - in order to make this point.

The argument proceeds as follows. The first section presents in greater details my theoretical argument on the 'discursive' nature of emotions. The rest of the chapter narrates how I conducted the inquiry. I proceeded in three steps. Firstly, I collected data on the discursive elements which mediate the airmen's emotional relationship to violence. I did so by interviewing about 40 airmen and members of the military staff (section 2). These interviews helped me to identify two important vectors of discourse (and emotions): the language that they use when they talk about their victims (section 3) and the routinized procedures which precede their lethal actions (section 4). I will conclude with some remarks on the interest and limitations of this approach to emotions.

A discursive approach to emotions

The Foucauldian notion of 'discourse' has led to many misinterpretations. Foucault does not use the term 'discourse' in a literal way, in the way that one terms a social actor's speech or writings 'discourse'. Foucault uses the notion of 'discourse' in a metaphorical way. The metaphor opposes 'language' - the medium that allows us to make an infinite number of statements - to 'discourse', the finite number of statements that are actually made (Foucault, 1969, p. 41). This leads him to observe that the reality we live in - i.e. all that seems natural to us (our beliefs, the things we say or do, the instruments we use, etc.) are made up of 'statements', i.e. words or things which carry social meaning. Methodologically, this entails identifying and interpreting the semiotic elements entailed in both 'discursive' (words, sentences, etc.) and 'non-discursive' practices (technologies, human artefacts, routinized actions, etc.).

Foucault did not explicitly link this notion of discourse to the question of emotions. However, he took a step in this direction when he reflected on the human body. In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History',

Foucault points out that the postulate on the historical and social construction of reality does not only apply to ideas and practices but, also, to the human body itself (Foucault, 1977). By extension, Foucault argues, against ‘constructivists’, that human beings do not ‘construct’ culture upon a given (trans-historical) nature. The whole of reality is a social construct, including the human body itself.

Several biologists (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and social scientists (MacLeish, 2013; Fierke, 2013) have illustrated the interest of Foucault’s discourse theory for the study of emotions. In what follows, I will draw upon the work of two authors who have applied this framework to the more specific question of current Western war violence: Judith Butler and Eyal Weizman (Butler, 2004, 2009, 2010; Weizman, 2012). As we shall see, their approaches not only nicely complement Foucault’s, but also complement each other.

Firstly, Butler’s approach is useful in understanding the social dimension of the ‘frames’ which fashion our emotional relation to violence. In her collection of essays entitled ‘frames of war’, she points out that one can experience the power of these frames when thinking about one’s differential reactions towards distant suffering. She observes, for instance, that many Westerners reacted with horror to the attacks of 9/11 whilst showing little compassion for the (far more numerous) victims of U.S. and Western wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to her, this shows that some powerful meaning structures operate behind what appears, at first sight, as ‘natural’ feelings: ‘as long as we remain against interpretation in such moments, we will not be able to give an account of why the affect of horror is differentially experienced’ (Butler, 2010, p. 49). She calls ‘frames of war’ the aforementioned meaning structures (or fragments of discourse) which move actors’ bodies in war contexts and divide the world in two categories: the ‘grievable’ lives one identifies with and those which remain excluded from what might be called, after Tocqueville, the modern ‘economy of pity’.

Secondly, Butler’s approach helps us to understand the political character of these frames. She notes, in this respect, that ‘frames of war’ are like photographic frames. They cannot grasp reality in its entirety. They entail a particular perspective, some arbitrary choices in terms of zooming, etc. In other words, they are ‘always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version’ (Butler, 2010, p. xi). The selective nature of the frames which fashion social compassion has few political consequences when applied to natural deaths. Thus, the fact that we do not sympathize with the thousands of unknown people who die every day is of little political consequence. When applied to war, however, the selective nature of the frame becomes highly political. The selective ‘economy of pity’ is what legitimates and naturalizes warlike violence on both sides. This is why Butler has proposed redefining war as this social activity that ‘divides populations into those who are grievable and those who are not’ (Butler, 2010, p. 38). In the case of current Western wars, the power of the frame lies in its ability to naturalize the representation that a certain violence - the violence perpetrated by the liberal secular state - is more human than the so called ‘terrorist’ or ‘criminal’ violence, regardless of their respective performances in terms of innocent victims (Butler, 2010, p. 20).

The second (Foucauldian) author on whom I have massively drawn is Eyal Weizman (Weizman, 2012). In his recent essay on ‘humanitarian violence’, Weizman also argues that selective compassion has become a greater driving force for violence than hatred or indifference. This does not imply that racist and reifying dynamics are completely absent in the new Western way of war. For instance, it is

clear that racialization contributes towards naturalizing the practice of using two different means of fighting 'terrorism': elite troops on the ground when 'terrorists' are located in Western territory and air power when they are located in the non-Western world (Delori, 2016a). Besides, it is clear that new technologies of war introduce more distance between combatants, thus helping to reify the victims of Western war violence. However, Weizman's framework helps us to understand that a third form of logic operates alongside the two aforementioned ones: the logic of 'humanitarian violence'.

Humanitarian violence differs from racist violence and bureaucratic violence in the sense that it neither grants negative nor null value to its victims. As humanist subjects, perpetrators of humanitarian violence do not experience joy or indifference when they kill people. They grant some positive value to all lives and know that violence is evil. Yet they consider that it is sometimes necessary to do some evil in order to avoid a greater one. In other words, they reject the old Manichean view that situations are either right or wrong. They assume that good and evil can be measured, calculated and weighted. Hence, their key idea is the 'principle of the lesser evil'. Weizman defines this rationale as follows:

The principle of the lesser evil is often presented as a dilemma between two or more bad choices in situations where available options are - or seem to be - limited. The choice made justifies harmful actions that would otherwise be unacceptable, since it allegedly averts even greater suffering (Weizman, 2012, p. 6).

Weizman gives several illustrations of this lesser evil principle. At the micro level, the most obvious example is the modern (non-sadistic) justification of torture. Memoranda released by the Bush administration in 2002 legitimized 'coercive interrogation methods' (a euphemism for torture) by referring to this principle of the lesser evil. These memos acknowledged that inflicting suffering on a defenceless body is morally wrong. In this sense, they acknowledged (to a certain extent) the humanity of the prisoners (they did not frame them as pure objects of hatred or indifference). However, the memos highlighted that this action (of inflicting suffering on a defenceless body) was acceptable if, firstly, it enabled useful information to be gathered (if it would help to prevent future 'terrorist' attacks) and if, secondly, the pain did not exceed a certain threshold. In practice, this threshold was very high. Indeed, as pointed out by Richter-Montpetit, 'in the post 9/11 lawfare the Bush administration juridically codified that abuse just short of killing a prisoner was considered permissible suffering' (Richter-Montpetit, 2014, p. 48). What matters is not the actual volume of violence but the very project of moderating it.

At the macro level, the most obvious illustrations of the lesser evil principle are 'humanitarian wars', i.e. those wars that are supposed to stop or impede massacres, genocides or some other 'greater evils'. Partisans of humanitarian wars acknowledge that they cause some evil when they wage war and kill civilians. However, they consider that this constitutes a lesser evil as it has helped to prevent 'mass murder' and, perhaps, 'genocide'. M. Shaw's justification of the NATO war in Kosovo in 1999 provides a classic illustration of this rationale. Shaw calculated that NATO aircraft killed about 3,000 innocent Serbian people in 1999. As a non-racist person, Shaw does not frame the killing of innocent Serbian people as a positive thing. As a humanist, Shaw is not indifferent to the fate of the victims of the NATO war. However, he considers that these 3,000 innocent victims constituted a lesser evil as they meant that worse massacres were avoided (Shaw, 2006 p. 22).

Weizman adopts a critical stance towards the lesser evil principle. Following Arendt, he notes that 'politically, the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil' (Weizman, 2012, p. 27). The problem does not only lie in the existence of some cognitive bias which may lead to a faulty assessment of both evils (as in the case of the disastrous 'humanitarian' war in Libya for instance⁴). The problem is deeper and has something to do with the non-democratic (hidden) face of modern humanism. Contrary to what it claims, and contrary to what the greatest thinkers of humanism predicted (Elias, 2000 (1939); Tocqueville, 1981 (1835)), modern humanist liberal discourse does not grant equal value to all lives. Rather, human lives have 'differential value (...) in the marketplace of death' (Asad, 2007, p. 94). This differential value does not only depend upon the racial and geographical distance between the humanist/liberal subject and the potential object of compassion. For instance, many modern humanist liberal subjects experienced compassion with the (geographically and racially remote) Afghan women oppressed by the Taliban, and this emotion contributed to naturalize the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Ayotte and Husain, 2005). In humanist/liberal discourse, the differential value of human lives depends, rather, on each life's distance from the standard of the humanist/liberal 'good life'.

All this illustrates how Weizman and Butler converge when assessing the characteristics of the emotion/violence nexus of current Western wars. They agree in rejecting classical approaches couched in terms of racist or bureaucratic violence. They argue that the greatest driving force of Western war violence is neither the arousal of negative emotions nor the neutralization of positive ones. Rather, violence has its roots in compassion or rather, the fact that humanist/liberal subjects experience more compassion for some than for others.

What can we say, finally, about the methodological implications of this framework? The first implication is this: from a discourse theory perspective, it is pointless to try to study emotions *per se*. This holds even more true in an interview-based inquiry. A scholar trying to analyse the emotions displayed by the actor during an interview would probably grasp just one thing: the emotions provoked by the social situation called an 'interview'. Hence, it is preferable to leave the actual emotions (the biological phenomena which move actors' bodies) aside and focus on discourse instead. The two authors I have presented above have done so in different ways. Butler - who is a professor of rhetoric - has analysed the role of language in the social construction of the mainstream approach to violence. Weizman - who is an architect - has investigated the material manifestation of contemporary frames of war: what he calls, after Ophir (2002), 'moral technologies'. I have tried here to combine both approaches, i.e. the approach focussing on the frames' ideational manifestations and the approach which analyses concrete technologies and concrete practices.

First step: interviewing the relevant actors

This study investigates the current emotion/violence nexus by looking at one particular case: the French bombing campaigns in Afghanistan (2001-2011), Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). The choice of

⁴ House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options, Third Report of Session 2016-17.

France as a case study stems from the fact that France, along with the U.S. and Britain, has been one of the group of most warlike countries since the end of the Cold War. Additionally, I have chosen to focus on airmen because of the centrality of air power in the 'new Western way of war' (Shaw, 2006). This centrality emerges from the fact that several Western wars have taken the form of pure air bombing campaigns (Kosovo 1999, Libya 2011, Islamic State since 2014, not to mention President Obama's drone wars), and that air power played a central role in most other military operations, in particular in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. My objective was to identify the actors' 'frames of war', i.e. those meaning structures which constitute their emotional relation to violence.

I did not start the research with any pre-conceived idea concerning the 'frames' that I would find. Indeed, the literature on this issue is dominated by two equally normative sets of arguments. Firstly, some essayists and anti-war activists have argued that new Western technologies of war such as remote control systems and computers have strong de-humanizing effects. Following this line of thought, Western combatants are said to develop a 'play-station mentality' (Cole, Dobbing, and Hailwood, 2010). They thus behave like the character of Eichmann depicted by Hannah Arendt in her famous essay (Arendt, 1963): they kill without realizing the practical consequences of their actions - the deaths, the suffering, the destruction, etc.

This view has been challenged by some 'defence intellectuals'⁵ who have argued, on the contrary, that Western fighter-jet pilots and drone operators are so 'humane' and so 'empathetic' that they develop 'post-traumatic stress disorders' when they kill civilians. As pointed out by Chamayou, this contrasting literature is equally normative and political. It reproduces a central trope of Western war propaganda: the orientalist (Barkawi and Stanski, 2013; Said, 1979) narrative which opposes two mirror characters: hateful/fanatical 'terrorists' and compassionate/reasonable Western combatants (Chamayou, 2013, p. 147). In other words, in embarking on this study I was convinced of the need for a more scientific approach to the question of the emotion/violence nexus in current Western wars.

Data gathering consisted of conducting interviews with the relevant actors. The interviews took place between December 2012 and March 2013 on French military bases. I interviewed two groups of people. Firstly, I conducted ten interviews with high-ranking officers of the French naval and air forces (one Air Force general, one admiral, and four colonels in both forces). These interviews were aimed at learning about the concrete aspects of contemporary French air wars: the strategies, the doctrines, the rules of engagement, and the technologies used by French air and naval forces. Indeed, a key assumption of this study is that the soldiers' frames are like all elements of 'discourse': they do not float in the air. They are mediated by instruments, procedures, routinized practices and apparatuses that both carry and fashion meaning (Holmqvist, 2013; van Veeren, 2014).

Secondly, I conducted interviews with those who actually drop bombs, i.e. the pilots and navigators (33 interviews). I was introduced as a 'CNRS researcher who is carrying out an independent study'. This introduction proved to be important in clarifying that I had not been commissioned by the military organization to learn about their qualities or potential weaknesses. I wanted to elicit their personal war experiences, not their capacity to present themselves as the 'best' pilots or navigators. For the same reason, I also laid great stress on the fact that the interviews would be anonymized.

⁵ The notion of 'defence intellectual' refers to scholars who work for think tanks or university departments sponsored by the industrial military complex.

The interviews took the form of dialogues where the interviewees were asked to talk freely about their personal experience of war. I structured the interviews around three main issues: how they make sense of the act of killing and the risk of being killed (1), how they perceive their enemies or the people that they kill (so-called 'collateral damage') (2), and what they think about the new technologies of war which allow them to kill from a distance (3).

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. I recorded them and analysed them by using the old Weberian interpretivist method. This means, in effect, that my approach was mainly 'qualitative'. I paid little attention to word counts, simply calculating the number of occurrences of some key words such as 'terrorist', 'jihadi', etc.). For the rest, I tried to 'understand by interpretation' - to use Weber's famous expression (*deutend verstehen*) – how they perceive the battlefield, how they represent their enemies, and how they make sense of the practice of war. This also means that I did not try to analyse the emotions that the airmen displayed during the interviews. I did not want to understand what it feels like to narrate one's war experiences after the events in the specific social interaction of the interview. Rather, I wanted to identify what they feel when they drop bombs. To do so, I tried to be as empathetic as I could. I tried to understand what Boudon calls the actors' social 'dispositions' and 'position', i.e. their social background, the influence of military training, what it means to be a fighter-bomber pilot/navigator, the concrete technologies which mediate their experience of war, etc. (Boudon, 1986).

The interviewees talked easily about their lethal actions. They did not know exactly how many people they had killed. Some said 'three or four'. Others said 'dozens, maybe one hundred'. One thing seems clear though: the airmen have no difficulty in giving meaning to the violence they perpetrate. Indeed, I did not observe any clear case of 'frame breaking', in Goffman's (1974) term. One interviewee explained that he suffered from PTSD. However, these 'stress disorders' had nothing to do with the question of killing. This person had been traumatized by an explosion which had occurred whilst he was in a military base in Afghanistan. Another interviewee experienced some difficulty in making sense of an action which resulted in the death of a child. However, this case appears in many ways as an exception. He killed the child by accident and, as we shall see, accidents do not constitute the main cause of civilian deaths in the new Western way of war.

To put it differently, the first finding of my study is that most pilots and navigators enjoy going on 'opex' (*operations extérieures*, external operations). They often compete against one another to obtain the 'hottest' (*chaud*) missions, i.e. those where they drop bombs. This made the literature on the PTSD syndromes of drone operators completely irrelevant. The French airmen that I have interviewed have no difficulty in killing and making sense of it. I interviewed one member of the psychiatric department of the French Air Force. He had conducted hundreds of interviews with pilots and navigators. He confirmed that he had not met one single person suffering from PTSD linked to killing operations.

The second finding of my study was that the literature on the 'play station mentality' is equally irrelevant. Although they do not know exactly how many people they have killed, the airmen know what they are doing. They know that their bombs kill both enemy combatants and civilians. They simply have no problem making sense of this for a number of reasons which I will elaborate upon later.

Second step: understanding what ideational frames fashion the actors' emotional relation to violence

I wrote above that 'frames of war' take both ideational and material forms. After the stage of data gathering, the second phase of my study consisted of analysing their main ideational manifestation: the very language airmen use when talking about their victims. To do so, I followed the example of Judith Butler in her studies of the language used by the Western mainstream media in the context of the 'war on terror' (Butler, 2004, 2009, 2010).

Butler has analysed how the Western mainstream media have depicted two groups of victims: the Western victims of the 'terrorist' attacks of 2001 on the one hand, and the non-Western victims of Western anti-terrorist wars on the other hand. In the former case, Butler argues, the mainstream media published the obituaries of the victims so that the public could learn about their names and stories. In the latter case, the mainstream media found no words other than 'collateral damage' or 'human shield'. She observes that this last expression – 'human shield' - is probably the most reifying as it suggests that 'those children are not really children, are not really alive, that they have already been turned to metal, to steel, that they belong to the machinery of bombardment, at which point the body of the child is conceived as nothing more than a militarized metal that protects the attacker against attack' (Butler 2010: xxvii).

Unsurprisingly, the airmen that I have interviewed drew on elements from both languages - the sensitive and the reifying -, depending on the people they were talking about. Thus, they expressed great concern for some populations: the people of Paris or New York who might be killed, in the future, by 'terrorists', the Libyan population oppressed by Gaddafi forces, and the Malian population under the threat of jihadists. These people have something in common: in French mainstream war narratives, they are the people that the French bombs are supposed to save or to 'make live' (Foucault, 1997 (1976), p. 214).

The interviewees use a complete different language when talking about the people they kill. Their language made me think about what Carol Cohn has called 'techno-strategic', i.e. the mathematical and abstract language used by the U.S. defence intellectuals who fashioned the deterrence theories current at the end of the Cold War. Cohn shows that the massive use of abstract periphrases had one important consequence: it erases the humane dimension of war and euphemizes the perception of violence (in her case nuclear bombing). Cohn tested the power of this language on herself: 'the more conversations I participated in using this language, the less frightened I was of nuclear war' (Cohn, 1987, p. 704).

Now, the airmen I have interviewed make extensive use of this 'techno-strategic' language when talking about enemy forces. For instance, they use the word 'killing' hardly at all. They explain, instead, that they 'deal with' (*traiter*) or 'neutralize' their 'targets'. This leads them to experience 'little pity' for the referents of these signifiers, i.e. the people who die when their bombs explode. Some airmen even show reflexivity about the ease with which they perpetrate this particular act: 'Honestly, I was preoccupied by this question before [my first killing]. I thought that it would be psychologically difficult to live with it. I happen to believe in God, so I may have a particular approach

to this question. I talked a lot about this with my family when I joined the military. Now, here is what strikes me the most: it left me completely indifferent. (...). And this disturbs me a little⁶.

Despite and because⁷ of the precision weapons that they sometimes use (see below), Western airmen kill many civilians. For instance, the economist M. Herold has calculated that the Western bombing campaign directly killed between 7,948 and 9,312 civilians in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2010, i.e. before the 'surge' of 2010 (Herold, 2012, p. 49). Although this is a small fragment of the U.S. led air war on terror, this figure reveals that these air wars 'have already resulted in massive losses of life that immeasurably exceed anything terrorists have managed to do' (Asad, 2007, p. 93).

Among the 36 airmen I have interviewed, only one expressed second thought about the killing of civilians. The event had taken place in Afghanistan. The aircraft was flying at a low altitude. For some reasons which remain unclear (probably a weaponry test), the pilot dropped a decoy device, i.e. a device which is intended to deflect the trajectory of possible anti-aircraft missiles. The decoy accidentally fell into the middle of a village and killed a child. The pilot talked about this event in the following terms: 'Yes, this affected me a little. That was in Afghanistan during a 'show of presence' (in English during the interview). (...) The child picked up one of my decoy devices. It tore away his hand and he died afterwards. (...). So yes, this was a hard time... However, it was an accident. If I had to do it again, I would'⁸.

The other interviewees who mentioned having killed 'non-combatants' expressed no second thoughts. The following interview extract resembles many others:

- INTERVIEWER: Have you ever had second thoughts about the bombs you dropped?
- AIRMAN: I kill terrorists. I do not target civilians. The guys we killed in Mali and Libya were no gentlemen farmers. They were planning terrorist attacks. When I kill somebody who plans to leave a bomb in the subway in Paris, I save lives. When I destroy a missile battery which bombs a market in the middle of Benghazi, I save Libyan lives.
- INTERVIEWER: Indeed. But the bombs you drop also kill civilians.
- AIRMAN: [silent] Yes, but if the amount of collateral damage – sorry, I do not like this word – if the number of civilian casualties is inferior to the number of people I save, it is fair to shoot. I know that this is not always easy to hear. Yet reason has to be opposed to emotion. I wish I had other means with which to neutralize them. Believe me. But I don't.⁹

This interview extract is interesting in many respects. Firstly, it illustrates that the airmen are fully aware of the lethal consequences of their actions and that they have no problem making sense of it. They know that they kill civilians, and this fact does not impinge upon the pleasure they take in going

⁶ Interview n°19 with a pilot, March 2013

⁷ So-called 'smart bombs' - i.e. bombs equipped with guidance systems - have ambivalent effects on the fate of civilians. On the one hand, they enable targeting of specific sites which are, sometimes, empty of civilians. On the other hand, they rarely miss their target, meaning that they often fall in the middle of a city. In this sense they differ from the 'blind' bombs of the Second World War which often fell in the sea or in no man's land. The consequence of this is simple: 'smart bombs' structurally kill a calculable number of civilians. I will elaborate more on this idea in the last section.

⁸ Interview n°13 with a pilot, March 2013

⁹ Interview n°3 with a pilot, December 2012

to war and fulfilling their missions. Secondly, this interview extract reveals the key to understanding their approach to violence. In contrast to the racist soldiers depicted by several historians of past wars (Audouin-Rouzeau, 2002; Barkawi, 2004), they do not really hate the people they kill. Nor do they fully reify them as the paradigm of bureaucratic violence would suggest (Arendt, 1963). As 'humanist' or 'liberal' subjects, they acknowledge that it is wrong to kill civilians. However, they consider that it is acceptable to kill X if it allows to save Y, provided that the killing of X constitutes a lesser evil than the killing of Y. As we shall see in the next section, they have some 'good intersubjective' reasons to frame their violence in such a way: their relation to violence is mediated by technologies which embody this very idea.

Third step: checking the frames' material manifestations

I wrote above that almost no airmen expressed second thoughts concerning the killing of civilians. To understand this, one must remember or uncover an important dimension of the Western way of war: airmen are socialized and trained to consent to killing civilians. Admittedly, the practice of carpet bombing has diminished. With the notable exceptions of the U.S. in Iraq (Olsson, 2012) and Israel in Lebanon and Gaza in 2008/2009¹⁰, Western air forces have ceased to target civilians in order to 'terrorize' the population or undermine its morale. Since the mid-2000, they have become good students of international humanitarian law in the sense that: (1) they do not target civilians per se (in accordance with the discrimination principle); and (2) they control the violence that they perpetrate (in accordance with the proportionality principle). This does not mean, however, that current Western air doctrines exclude the killing of civilians. On the contrary, the killing of civilians is accepted in principle and, furthermore, measured and calculated. Concretely, current military doctrines state that the killing of civilians is acceptable provided that it does not exceed a given threshold. I will illustrate this by presenting an important element in current Western air wars: the 'Non-Combatant Casualty Cut-Off Value' or 'NCV'.

At first sight, the NCV appears as one of these numerous military acronyms that have little resonance with most people's lives. In reality, the 'Non-combatant Casualty Cut-Off Value' has important human consequences. It refers to a simple reality: the number of civilians that airmen are allowed to kill, or to put at risk, every time they drop a bomb. The NCV varies, in practice, between 0 and 30 (rarely more). An NCV = 0 means that that the airmen should not put any 'non-combatant' at risk. An NCV = 30 means that they are allowed to open fire if they estimate that they will not kill more than 30 civilians.

The airmen learn this number before taking off, yet it really becomes real when they arrive near their target. When this happens, they must follow a procedure called 'PID-CDE-ROE'.

- PID stands for 'positive identification'. It consists of checking whether they have identified the right target: the 'jihadist', the 'terrorist', the 'ammunition dump', etc.

¹⁰ See the famous Goldstone report published by the U.N.: Human Rights Council, 12th session, agenda item 7, "Human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories? Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict", 25 September 2009

- CDE means ‘Collateral Damage Estimate’. It reminds pilots and navigators that they must calculate the number of ‘non-combatants’ that they will put at risk if they drop the bomb. Concretely, they estimate this number by counting the civilians that they see. At this stage, they ask the following questions: is this person a male or a female? Is this a child or a dog? How far are they from the military target (distance to military targets is central in the military definition of combatants).
- ROE stands for ‘Rules of Engagement’. It invites airmen to check whether the amount of probable ‘collateral damage’ (i.e. number of civilian deaths) is lower than the NCV stated by the rules of engagement. If this is the case, they open fire. If not, the decision to open fire (or not) is taken at a higher level of the chain of command.

It is not known exactly which members of the military staff or government determine the ‘non-combatant cut-off value’. It is known, however, that this depends on several factors. It depends, firstly, on some subjective and arbitrary assessment of the ‘value’ of civilians. In this respect, the most important variable is geographical or/and racial. When a terrorist attack occurs on the territory of a Western state, the NCV used by policy and military forces is close to zero, meaning that they do not want to put at risk any French/Western civilians. When they operate in the non-Western world, however, the NCV rises significantly. This is why Western forces use different instruments when they operate in Western territory or outside the West: elite commandos on the ground in the former case, armed drones and fighter-bomber jets in the latter¹¹. Elite commandos can be used to ‘neutralize’ terrorists without causing ‘collateral damage’. Air bombing structurally kills civilians.

Secondly, the NCV depends on a subjective and arbitrary assessment of the value of the military target. During the US war in Iraq, for instance, the US ROE stated that the NCV was 29 for each ‘high-value military target’ (Weizman, 2012, p. 129). This meant, concretely, that the pilots were allowed to kill up to 29 civilians in order to eliminate a high-ranking member of Al Qaida or a senior official of Saddam Hussein’s regime. When the target is a low-ranking enemy combatant, the NCV declines significantly. This not only means, to return to Asad, that human lives have ‘differential value (...) in the marketplace of death’ (Asad, 2007, p. 94). It also means that these differential values are relational. When a person becomes a ‘high-value military target’, the value of all those people located nearby breaks down. Their killing becomes a ‘lesser evil’, a necessary means of achieving a greater end: the elimination of a ‘high value military target’. This is why the ‘securitization’ of terrorism plays a central role in the death toll of current Western wars. The social construction of terrorism as an existential threat naturalize actions - such as the bombing of foreign cities - which would appear nonsensical otherwise.

Despite their obvious arbitrariness, the airmen involved rarely challenge the frames constructed by the rules of engagement, in particular the key notion of the NCV. Several factors explain this uncritical stance. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, they have faith in the state and the military organization

¹¹ It is important to highlight, in this respect, that the choice between both security instruments does not stem from technical considerations. As the assassination of Bin Laden illustrates, Western government do not hesitate to put elite troops on the ground when they deem it necessary. The preference for air bombing outside the West simply stems from the fact that they do not want to put their military personnel at risk and prefer ‘transferring risks’ to non-Western civilians (Shaw, 2006).

they serve. In this sense, the old Weberian argument that the state has managed to ‘monopolize the legitimate use of physical force’ appears relevant.

Secondly and more importantly, several technologies contribute towards naturalizing the implicit interpretive schemes associated with the rules of engagement. A retired pilot told me that current fighter-bomber jet pilots behave like ‘robots’. This is probably hyperbole. However, it is clear that complying with the ROE has become one of the most important tasks assigned to fighter-bomber jet pilots and navigators. In the absence of enemies who would be able to retaliate or simply ‘com-bat’ (fight with), complying with the ROE is what determines the failure or the success of the ‘mission’. Another concrete element reinforces this logic: pilots and navigators are among the many victims of new public management. Concretely, they are spied by their managers/commanders. The latter scrutinize the radio and video recordings of their missions so that pilots have potentially to account for their every act and everything they say. The consequence of this is simple: if they do not want to lose their job, they must accept the rules of the game. Within their social field, the rule is the following: drop as many bombs as you can but never infringe the rules. Although the violence that they perpetrate creates many more civilian victims than the ‘terrorist’ or ‘criminal’ violence that they fight, they see themselves as ‘moderators of violence’. For instance, seven out of the forty interviewees spontaneously compared their job to that of first aid doctors or firemen. This is why I argued that their relation to violence resembles Madame de Sévigné: they do not really hate or despise anybody. They represent themselves as compassionate subjects. They ‘kill’ enemies and ‘let civilians die’ because they want the people who meet their definition of the ‘good life’ to live.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to illustrate the interest of a discursive approach to emotions. I took the example of an investigation into French fighter-bomber pilots in order to make the point that one does not need to study emotions directly in order to understand how they operate. Since emotions are what discourse feels like within the social actors’ bodies, it is possible to understand their power by studying discourse. In the case under investigation here, I found that neither hatred nor (absolute) reification are central motors of violence. Rather, violence takes on meaning within a framing which consists of granting different (positive) values to human lives and assuming that it is necessary to erase some lives so that others may live.

Like all frames of war, this one is underpinned by power structures of some considerable weight. In the case under investigation here, these power structures naturalize the use of ‘sovereign’ instruments (the bombings) within a discursive framework whose key notion is the preservation of life. In this sense, they illustrate the ‘necropolitical’ (Allinson, 2015; Mbembe, 2003) dimension of our humanitarian present (Fassin, 2010).

Methodologically, I came to these insights in three steps. Firstly, I gathered data about the fragments of discourse or ‘frames of war’ which constitute the actors’ emotional relation to violence. Secondly, I analysed an important frame of war: the very words that the actors use when talking about their victims. Thirdly, I tried to monitor and confirm/disconfirm my interpretations by investigating the

concrete semiotic elements which mediate these actors' relationship to violence, i.e. the procedures that they use before dropping bombs.

So far, I have stressed the interest of my approach. What can I say, to conclude, about its limitations? Firstly, this approach says little about the classical distinction between feelings (thought of as personal), emotions (thought of as social), and affects (thought of as corporal and, therefore, neither personal nor social). As MacLeish puts it in good Foucauldian fashion, these distinctions become pointless if one accepts that everything is discourse, including our very corporal and sensorial experiences (MacLeish, 2013, p. 14). Besides, this approach will not speak to those colleagues who assume that emotions are natural or personal phenomena. In other words, this discursive approach to emotions says nothing about 'human nature'. It is unable to state whether human beings are naturally sadistic or whether they are 'naturally' averse to violence. These questions lie outside my episteme. Addressing them would imply abandoning the assumption of the discursive ontology of the body, i.e. the key assumption of this approach. In my defence, it seems that the entire history of violence suggests that ordinary human beings easily learn to become violent (Arendt, 1963; Browning, 2002), or to cease to be violent (Delori, 2016b).

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