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ETHNIC CLEANSING

Steven Alan Samson

Earlier this year I was asked to speak at a college on the subject of "ethnic cleansing," and presumably make sense of its senselessness. But the phrase, "ethnic cleansing," is itself part of the problem it describes. The words are impersonal and clinically detached from a reality they effectively deny by understating. They desensitize us to its terrors.

This phrase first came into general use in connection with the Bosnian civil war which has accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia. Like such earlier terms as "purge," "eliminate," and "liquidate," it is used as a euphemism for "genocide," which in turn is a euphemism for the mass murder of a class or race of people. It is the moral equivalent of another euphemism, the word "euthanasia:" the so-called "good death" that has gotten considerable attention through the efforts of the Hemlock Society and Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

What motivates such a policy or practice? Primarily envy. Envy is not simply jealousy. It is hatred. It is the desire to destroy what a person *has* or *is*. It is a major form taken by the lust for power over others. For example, the French Huguenots, a class of Protestants that included prominent noblemen and successful merchants, provoked the envy of the Catholic royal family and the common people. Following the wedding of a Huguenot prince to the king's sister in Paris, King Charles IX ordered the murder of several

Huguenot leaders who had gathered for the wedding. For weeks afterwards, terror and destruction spread through the French countryside.

"Ethnic cleansing" as an idea hearkens back to nineteenth century racial and national ideologies, some of which sought to achieve ethnic purity by forbidding mixed marriages [*miscegenation*] and promoting *eugenics* [breeding programs] that encouraged large families by favored groups, while pursuing sterilization and abortion for unpopular groups, often known as "enemies of the people." In one of his earliest works H. G. Wells predicted that the scientifically-governed society of the future, "the New Republic," would not blink at destroying people it considered defective.

The phrase "ethnic cleansing," like the Soviet "purge," suggests something as ordinary as flushing out a septic tank. The implied public health metaphor is designed to reassure, to smooth over, to disguise reality and calm the natural sense of outrage it might evoke. The antiseptic quality of the phrase should offend us because it devalues what is of greatest value: life, love, compassion, community.

In "Politics and the English Language," an essay written just after the Second World War, George Orwell, the author of Animal Farm and 1984, got right to the point.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the

dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.¹

Such euphemisms are what Theodore Roosevelt long ago called "weasel words." Orwell maintained that the "great enemy of clear language is insincerity." Our language has been corrupted by the hypocrisies of politicians and diplomats who, whether seeking reelection or negotiating a truce, have a vested interest in disguising their true intentions.

Simone Weil, the French philosopher, put the matter very starkly in an essay entitled "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," which she wrote after the fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1940. Her essay is a commentary on the great epic poem by Homer written nearly 3000 years ago, a work that is unsparing in its brutal realism. The reality she finds in its verses may be seen behind today's news just as readily as in ancient times. Listen to what she says about the "ethnic cleansing" of Troy:

¹George Orwell, A Collection of Essays (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 172-73.

To define force -- it is that *x* that turns anybody into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us:

. . . the horses
Rattled the empty chariots through the files of battle,
Longing for their noble drivers. But they on the
ground
Lay, dearer to the vultures than to their wives.

The hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust:

All around, his black hair
Was spread; in the dust his whole head lay,
That once-charming head; now Zeus had let his enemies
Defile it on his native soil.

The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero's head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends.²

Later in the essay, Simone Weil makes it clear that the poem is about genocide: the wanton destruction of a race of people. "The whole of the *Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity the human race can experience -- the destruction of a city. This calamity could not tear more at the heart had the poet been born in Troy." Calling the *Iliad* the only truly great epic poem of western civilization, she saw the Greek tragedies and the biblical Gospels as its truest successors.

But let's turn from ancient history to today's front page

²Simone Weil, The Iliad, or The Poem of Force (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, c. 1957), pp. 3-4.

stories. Consider this item from the Associated Press:

Juliana Mukankwaya is the mother of six children and the murderer of two, the son and daughter of people she knew since she herself was a child.

Last week, Mukankwaya said, she and other women rounded up the children of fellow villagers they perceived as enemies. With gruesome resolve, she said, they bludgeoned the stunned youngsters to death with large sticks.

"They didn't cry because they knew us," said the woman. "they just made big eyes. We killed too many to count."

Wearing a black shawl and a blank expression, the slightly built 35-year-old said she was doing the children a favor, since they now were orphans who faced a hard life. Their fathers had been butchered with machetes and their mothers had been taken away to be raped and killed, she said.

Mukankwaya is a member of the Interahamwe, the name for innumerable Hutu tribal militias that have been blamed for slaughtering an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people since April 6, when a mysterious plane crash killed the Hutu presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi.

Most of the victims have been members of the minority Tutsi tribe and Hutus perceived as opponents of the government.³

To describe this woman as a sociopath and call her actions inhuman is just another way of denying reality. She is human: all too human. She rationalizes her misdeeds by masking them as acts of compassion. In this how different is she from the rest of us?

For three years I taught murderers, rapists, child molesters, and other felons at the Oregon State Penitentiary. They were no better equipped than this woman to acknowledge the depravity of their deeds. Their language betrayed them. By turning their victims into things, they also depersonalized themselves, too often speaking of

³"Kill Thy Neighbors? Rwandans Defend Acts." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 May 1994, p. A1.

their crimes in the third person.

This reminds me of Hannah Arendt's account of the trial of a famous Nazi, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. One of the great political philosophers of our time, Arendt was struck by the chilling ordinariness of the moral monsters who operated the Nazi death camps, by what she called "the banality of evil." To paraphrase Mme. Roland: Ideology! What crimes are committed in your name!

So while the concept of ethnic cleansing compasses the death of individuals and even entire nations, it also shows how our language is being debased by the adherents of "armed doctrines." What is an ideology, after all, except euphemism on a large scale? What purpose does it serve except, as an ancient poet wrote, to "make the worse appear the better reason?" Samuel Johnson might well conclude that ideology has replaced patriotism as "the last refuge of a scoundrel." Among radical environmentalists, the so-called "deep ecologists" have gone so far as to describe humanity as a cancer on the planet. Like the phrase "useless eaters" of Second World War vintage, referring to the old and helpless, such an attitude depicts human beings as a problem to be remedied.

If the threat implied by such thinking seems far-fetched or remote, then consider the evidence. *Before* the horrors unleashed by Pol Pot in Cambodia and Idi Amin in Uganda had gained world attention in the mid- to late-1970s, the Russian mathematician Igor Shafarevich wrote: "In the near future the leaders of the socialist movements will look forward with surprising sangfroid [blood-lust],

and occasionally even with open satisfaction, to the destruction, if not of all mankind, then of the greater part of it."⁴ Westerners generally and Americans in particular typically refuse to recognize the enormity of the evil, keeping silent instead.

It is very difficult for us to scrutinize evil in human form. Several years ago Alexander Solzhenitsyn elaborated on Bertrand Russell's observation that Vladimir Lenin, the first Soviet dictator, was uncommonly evil: characterized by what he called "the absence of any mercy, the absence of any humanity in his approach to people, the masses, to anyone who did not follow him precisely."

This century has seen troubles on a scale that defies description: two world wars (1914-1918, 1939-1945); hundreds of brushfire wars; the pogroms against Jews in the Ukraine that began late in the 19th century; a generation of massacres directed against Armenians by Turks beginning in 1894; the mass starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants during the winter of 1932-33; the deportation of Crimean Tatars to Siberia; the gulags and concentration camps in scores of countries; murderous medical experiments on living POWs; the Holocaust directed against Central and East European Jews; the massive destruction of large parts of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, and other major cities; not to mention the "ordinary" murders, suicides, "mercy killings," and crime statistics that today numb our senses. Human life has been so cheapened that we are becoming

⁴Igor Shafarevich, "Socialism in Our Past and Future," in Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *et al. From Under the Rubble* (Chicago: Regenergy Gateway, 1981), pp. 63-64.

insensible to conditions that would have horrified our ancestors. Far from being concealed any longer, death -- like sex -- has come out of the closet in a lurid pornography that reduces all moral distinctions to a common denominator: a world devoid of value because life is deprived of meaning.

The First World War destroyed the fruits of a thousand years of western civilization. It seems that we, the heirs of that civilization, have forsaken the cumulated wisdom of generations of experience and turned our backs on history. As an old man once remarked to Solzhenitsyn, "men have forgotten God."

Rather than accepting the challenge of rebuilding our moral and cultural foundations, we continue to explore all avenues of escape. Where does this take us except further into self-destructive envy, greed, and guilt? But we cannot avoid looking in the mirror. We cannot escape this century's obsession with death and destruction.