

Chapter 6

Spectators and Victims: Between Denial and Projection

6.1 Global Risks and Absence of Fear

So let us go back, first of all, to the two main defence strategies against fear which had worked since early modernity: *technology* and *politics*. However, as I have already hinted, at present they seem to be experiencing an evident situation of stalemate and substantial inefficacy.

As the global risks have shown us, technology itself has become a source of unforeseeable threats. From a tool with the primary aim of responding to fear of natural events, making the surrounding world familiar and emancipating ourselves from nature in order to satisfy needs and desires and permit a better life, technology is now producing unprecedented and disturbing dangers, with the complicity of *homo creator's* Promethean hubris. What was a means has become an end. Man has lost his capacity to control it and foresee its effects, made all the more inauspicious by global dissemination of the risks. The 'Promethean gap' denounced by Günther Anders – namely the Promethean split between doing and foreseeing, producing and imagining – ends up generating a situation of passiveness and dispossession which causes an inversion, or rather, a 'perversion' of human power into impotence. The increasingly unavoidable perception of a world out-of-control and the probable irreversibility of certain events seems to be progressively undermining the trust in the fact that technology contains its own remedies, and transforms *homo faber*, dominator of nature and the world, into a pale parody of himself.¹

In spite of persistent complicity and illusions, fuelled by the seductive force of technologies still laden with promises, the global Self therefore appears exposed to a spiral of anxiety and insecurity which is equally as pervasive as his calling towards unlimitedness.

Besides, he cannot not find sufficient reassurance and protection even in the other traditional strategy that modernity, since the outset, had entrusted with the task of

¹ On these topics see Part I.

freeing men from fear: that is, politics. That globalization produces a crisis in politics is, at this point, and as I have also already hinted, an undisputable fact. It is by no means an 'end', as some would have it according to a postmodern cliché, but just that, a crisis. It is a crisis of politics in its modern and state form, the weakening of the state's sovereignty. This does not mean that states, among other things increasingly numerous, do not retain large margins of power, for example, at the military and fiscal level.² But there is no doubt that the nation-state appears increasingly inadequate, on one hand, to cope with risks produced by global powers (technology and economics) which have become free to expand since they are upheld by an anarchical logic, heedless of territorial boundaries; and to cope, on the other hand, with the challenges to identity of the new (ethnic, religious and cultural) forms of communitarianism which are introducing, as we have seen, elements of radical conflictuality and damaging the capacity of cohesion. In other words, the state is seeing its sovereign decision-making capacity weaken owing to the imbalance between the 'locality' of politics and the 'globality' of powers³; and it is proving impotent in its function of social cohesion because of the 'local' fragmentation produced by the explosion of identity conflicts.

The Hobbesian fear-politics-security nexus is irreparably damaged, leaving room for a widespread anxiety which thus loses the main tool to channel it into.

Thus, in the face of this twofold stalemate preventing the two traditional tools for the objective and rational resolution of fear from working effectively, I would now like to suggest that defence mechanisms are implemented which act with respect to the actual reality of the danger. In the case of *global risks*, it is a danger that becomes subject to *denial*, and in the case of the *other*, subject to *projective and persecutory* dynamics aimed at reducing his – the other's – indefiniteness. It needs to be underlined straight away that these mechanisms are anything but new. Over time psychology and psychoanalysis have singled them out as fundamental and often unescapable strategies for the psyche's survival. However, in this case they take on a pathological torsion and as a result end up proving to be *ineffective*. In the acknowledgement – in however confused a manner – of the impossibility of a rational resolution to fear, people seem to regress, at the individual and collective level, towards psychological forms of defence (denial and projection) which specularly convert into 1. a response that I propose defining as *implosive* (and *individualistic*) and 2. an *explosive* (and *communitarian*) response. Namely, they convert into essentially pathological responses that oscillate between an absence and an excess of fear, between indifference and violence, and that are incapable of generating a productive and liberatory metamorphosis of fear.

While it may be true, as we have seen, that global risks are one of the two main sources of fear, it is also true that the problem becomes complicated, compared to the linear and immediate phenomenology of the danger-fear nexus, since in

² See Sassen, *Losing Control*.

³ See Bauman, *In Search of Politics* and Bertrand Badie, *L'impuissance de la puissance. Essai sur les incertitudes et les espoirs des nouvelles relations internationales* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

this case a *subjective* factor comes into play, linked to the capacity and manner of *perceiving* the threats. It is telling that sociology and psychology converge on the importance of this aspect, underlining the fact that the very characteristics of the risk have a definite influence on the way in which it is perceived.⁴ Ulrich Beck had already stressed the fact that the often invisible nature of the global risks, the unforeseeability of their effects and the only potential character of the damage which they provoke mean that they are removed from our perception and require the intervention of a reflexive attitude interpreting the new scenarios through a knowledge that is equal to the new challenges. But in reality the problem is more complex still, since rather than an absence, we are faced with processes that *distort the perception and assessment* of the risk, which affect both the emotional and the cognitive spheres, and above all how they interact together.

Among the approaches sensitive to this problem, the one which seems to dwell on it most is cognitive psychology. Starting from the classic studies by Chauncey Starr and then Fischhoff and Slovic,⁵ and on the basis of the so-called psychometric paradigm, cognitive psychology has built complex cognitive maps aimed at providing as exhaustive a list as possible of the variables that influence the subjective perception of risk. The conclusions that have emerged from this interpretative approach show, for example, that concern in the face of threats (whether they derive from particular activities, substances or technologies) grows in correspondence to certain characteristics, amongst which the involuntary nature of the risks, the impossibility of controlling them, their capacity to cause irreversible damage and their originating from an unknown source. But above all, the results stress the fact that individuals are subject to distorted assessments and judgements in relation to the risks they are exposed to. For example, they tend to overestimate threats publicized by the media even if they are infrequent; to consider dangers dealt with voluntarily as more acceptable compared to those to which we are subjected or which are completely unprecedented or not very familiar; to feel fear in the face of very vivid events (11 September 2001), at the same time being quite incapable of a historical memory that links these same events together.⁶

⁴ See Savadori and Rumiati, *Nuovi rischi, vecchie paure*; Mannarini, *Percorsi della paura*; De Marchi, Pellizzoni and Ungaro, *Il rischio ambientale*, chap. III; Lupton, *Risk*, chap. 3; see also Emanuele Djalma Vitali, et al., *Pericoli e paure. La percezione del rischio tra allarmismo e disinformazione* (Marsilio: Venice, 1994).

⁵ See Chauncey Starr, "Social Benefit Versus Technological Risk," *Science*, no. 165 (1969): 1232–38; Baruch Fischhoff, Paul Slovic, Sarah Lichtenstein, Stephen Read, and Barbara Combs, "How Safe Is Safe Enough? A Psychometric Study of Attitude Towards Technological Risks and Benefits," *Policy Sciences*, no. 9 (1978): 127–52; Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff, and Sarah Lichtenstein, "Facts Versus Fear. Understanding Perceived Risks," in *Judgement Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Slovic, *The Perception of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 2000).

⁶ See Mannarini, *Percorsi della paura*, 78–79, Savadori and Rumiati, *Nuovi rischi, vecchie paure*, 44–59, Lupton, *Risk*, 20.

While the merit of this approach is that it accepts and recognizes the presence of the subjective aspect and the uncertainty factor in defining the concept of risk, pointing out the presence of non-rational responses, its limits lie, however, in its still strongly assuming the notion of probability.⁷ Namely, it ignores what is instead underlined by Mary Douglas, that is, the social and institutional context and the symbolic-cultural factors that influence the perception of the threats,⁸ and re-proposes the idea of an essentially individualistic and de-contextualized social actor based on an abstract idea of rationality. Finally, what we are most interested in here, in part deriving from the latter aspect, the limit of this approach lies in its failure to account for the *why*, the deep reasons that pollute a correct perception and assessment of the risks. In this connection, based on the reassessment of the role of emotions that has greatly questioned the hegemonic paradigm of rationality⁹ over the last few decades, some authors have underlined that cognitive and emotional factors have to go together in order to recognize the existence of a risk and to weigh up its possible consequences.¹⁰ They have put forward the idea that the information that enters our cognitive system can only have an effective impact on our action if it succeeds in creating images laden with emotion in our psyche. In other words, this means that we can be perfectly aware of particular threats without this involving us emotionally. Put differently, only if this converts into the capacity to ‘feel’, to react emotionally and imagine its possible effects can our knowledge of the risk be effectively said to be knowledge, and therefore produce apt mobilization.

Now, the problem with regard to global risks seems to be prompted, as Günther Anders had already perfectly grasped in his diagnosis of fear in the age of technology, by the very imbalance between knowing and feeling. This imbalance is none other than one of the many variants of the psychic split that characterizes the contemporary subject and that Anders, as has already been hinted, calls the ‘Promethean gap’. With this expression, he alludes in general to the detachment between the faculties, first of all between the power to do and the capacity to foresee, which characterizes contemporary *homo faber*, or rather *homo faber* who has become *homo creator*. Paradoxically what corresponds to the immense human power to

⁷ See Peter M. Wiedermann, “Understanding Risk Perception,” in *Communicating About Risks to Environment and Health in Europe*, ed. Philip C. R. Gray, Richard M. Stern, and Marco BioCCA (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998); Joop Van der Pligt, “Risk Appraisal and Health Behaviour,” in *Social Psychology and Health: European Perspectives*, ed. Derek R. Rutter and Lyn Quine (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1994).

⁸ See Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992); Douglas, *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*.

⁹ The obligatory reference is to Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Putman, 1994). But on the cognitive role of emotions, from Niklas Luhmann to Martha Nussbaum, psychology and sociology, semiotics and philosophy converge. On this topic see Elena Pulcini, “Passioni,” in *I racconti della storia*, ed. Franco Cardini, Mario Rosa and Aldo Schiavone, vol. 6, *Uomini, donne, vita quotidiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2004), 484–93.

¹⁰ Savadori and Rumati, *Nuovi rischi, vecchie paure*, 59–63.

produce and create permitted by developments in technology is man's inability to imagine its consequences:

The faculties have got further and further away from each other so now they can no longer see each other; as they cannot see each other, they no longer come into contact, they no longer do each other harm. In short: man as such no longer exists, there only exists he who acts or produces on one hand, and he who feels on the other; man *as* producer and man *as* feeling, and only these specialized fragments of men have a reality.¹¹

No more are our imagination and our emotions equal to our unlimited power; at this point man's soul is irreparably 'outdated' with respect to what he produces and his colossal performances. In short, no more can we keep up-to-date with our Promethean productivity and with the world that we ourselves have built:

we are about to build a world that we cannot keep up with, and, in order to "catch" it, demands are made that go way beyond our imagination, our emotions and our responsibility.¹²

This 'schizophrenia',¹³ which is where the fundamental pathology of our time resides, prompts the paradoxical and ambivalent combination of power and impotence, activity and passivity, knowledge and unawareness that exposes the contemporary Prometheus not only to previously inconceivable risks, but, also and above all, to the impossibility to recognize their destructive potential. This pathological drift appears particularly evident in the risk *par excellence* of the age of technology, which undermines not only the quality of individuals' lives (like in the case of the possible effects of the biotechnologies), but humankind's very survival on the planet: namely, the risk produced by the creation of the nuclear bomb, which we can recognize as the first effectively *global* challenge.¹⁴ Before the horror of Hiroshima and the spectre of humankind's self-destruction Anders says:

We really have gained the omnipotence that we had been yearning for so long, with Promethean spirit, albeit in a different form to what we hoped for. Given that we possess the strength to prepare each other's end, we are the *masters of the Apocalypse. We are infinity.*¹⁵

But the inability of our imagination to be equal to our unlimited power makes the latter mortally dangerous and transforms us into potential victims of what we ourselves have built:

We, the men of today, are the first men to dominate the Apocalypse, hence we are also the first to be endlessly subject to its threat. We are the first Titans, hence we are also the *first* dwarves or *pygmies* – or whatever else we care to call ourselves, we beings with our collective deadline – we are no longer mortal as individuals, but as a group; whose existence is exposed to annulment.¹⁶

¹¹ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, I, 272.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 17–18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 272.

¹⁴ This aspect is underlined by Cerutti, *Global Challenges*, 11 ff.

¹⁵ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, I, 239.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 242.

Suffice it to think that it is impossible to see the bomb simply a means; an impossibility generated by the fact that

if someone used the bomb... the means would not be extinguished in the purpose, but, on the contrary, the effect of the presumed “means” would put an end to the purpose. And it would not be *one* effect, but an unforeseeable chain of effects, in which the end of our life would be but one link among the many.¹⁷

The gap between the power to do and the power to foresee, therefore, gives rise to the paradoxical coexistence of omnipotence and vulnerability, which exposes future humankind and the whole of civilization to the risk of extinction, thereby configuring the apocalyptic scenario of a ‘world without man’.¹⁸ But the problem does not stop here. Indeed, if men, even when faced with the loss of foresight and projectuality caused by their own action, were capable of recognizing the reality of the danger, a change of direction could be set in motion to restore their control over their future. Or, to put it in terms that allow us to return to our theme, if people felt *fear* in the face of the spectre of self-destruction and the enormity of the risks ahead, they would probably manage to break that Promethean spiral of unlimitedness and restore sense and purpose to their action.

Furthermore, this is the normative premise at the basis of Hans Jonas’s whole line of argument in favour of an ethics of responsibility. He starts from a similar diagnosis to that of Anders on the drifts of technological power and the threats, for the whole living world, produced by a ‘finally unbound Prometheus’ to suggest what he defines as a ‘heuristics of fear’, as the precondition for ethically responsible action. ‘[...] it is an anticipated *distortion* of man,’ he says, ‘that helps us to detect that in the normative conception of man which is to be preserved from that threat [...]. *We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake.*’¹⁹ This means that only the fear of ‘losing the world’ can push us to responsibly take on the problem of how to preserve it.

I shall come back to the nexus between fear and responsibility later on.²⁰ But the problem, which Anders strongly underlines – showing, unlike Jonas, its complex anthropological and psychic roots – is that today we are in the presence of the *unavailability of fear*; in actual fact it is paradoxically absent, due to the additional and deeper manifestation of the Promethean gap which is the *imbalance between knowing and feeling*. Indeed, there is no one who does not know what the bomb is and who does not know its possible, catastrophic consequences, but, Anders adds, ‘most people indeed only “know” it: in the emptiest of manners’.²¹ Namely, this

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 251.

¹⁸ Anders speaks of the turn symbolized by the passage from ‘man without world’ to ‘world without man’ in his Introduction to *Mensch ohne Welt. Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur* (Munich: Beck, 1984).

¹⁹ Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 26–27.

²⁰ See Part III.

²¹ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, I, 247.

knowledge does not generate reactions, it does not convert into action. Why not? Because no *feeling*, no emotionally founded consciousness suitably corresponds to it; because ‘in comparison to what we know and what we can produce, we can imagine and feel too little’.²² This asynchrony, Anders points out, is something that pertains to human nature as a matter of fact. In general, in itself this is not bad, since it only shows that feeling is slower to transform. However, so to speak, it degenerates into a pathology when the gap between the faculties becomes too wide, as is happening today. As a consequence, it breaks all bonds and communication between them,²³ and reduces contemporary men to the ‘most dissociated, most disproportionate in themselves, most inhuman that have ever existed.’²⁴ Therefore, it is here, in the inadequacy of our emotional resources with respect to our productive power, that the anthropological root of our ‘blindness to the Apocalypse’ lies.²⁵ And this inadequacy, which is true for all the emotions in general, concerns fear first of all. Everyone, in however confused a manner and in spite of the minimization strategies implemented by those who produce it, realize that the bomb is not a pure means whose function ends in the fulfilment of a purpose, but a monstrous ‘*unicum*’ that, together with our lives and the lives of future generations, can put an end to all purposes *tout court*.²⁶ Yet, surprisingly, *there is no fear*:

If today we were to seek out fear (*Angst*),* *real* fear in Vienna Paris, London, New York – where the expression ‘*Age of Anxiety*’ is very much in use –, the booty would be extremely modest. Of course, we would find the word ‘fear’, in swarms even, in whole reams of publications [...]. Because today fear has become a commodity; and these days everyone is talking *about* fear. But those talking *out of* fear these days are very few.²⁷

If we are to observe our present-day situation, we could even claim that the more fear becomes the subject of talk in the newspapers and mass media, the more it is withdrawn from emotional perception and is anaesthetized by the reassuring urgency of routine and day-to-day concerns.

The anaesthetizing mechanism also works in a directly proportionate manner to the enormity of the risk and the stake at play. While it may be true that at best we

²² Ibid., I, 269.

²³ Ibid., I, 267–68.

²⁴ Ibid., I, 271–72.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, Part IV, I, 234ff. Anders underlines its historical roots, such as trust in progress that prevents man from thinking of an ‘end’, and above all, the configuration at the anthropological level of what he defines as the ‘medial man’, whose passive and conformist action ends up removing his ability to project himself into the future, together with all sense and purpose. See *ibid.*, Part 5, I, 276ff.

²⁶ Ibid., I, 254ff.

* Translator’s note: Anders only uses one term – *Angst* – and does not distinguish between anxiety and fear. Since, however, the meaning with which he uses the term *Angst* coincides more with ‘fear’ in the acceptance put forward by Elena Pulcini, I have decided to translate it with ‘fear’ so as to distinguish it from ‘anxiety’.

²⁷ Ibid., I, 264.

are able to imagine our own death, but not that of tens or thousands of people, and that we may be able to destroy a whole city without batting an eyelid while not managing, however, to imagine the actual, terrible scenario of ‘smoke, blood and ruins’, it is inevitable that we are totally incapable of perceiving the destruction of all humankind²⁸: ‘Before the thought of the Apocalypse, the soul remains inert. The thought remains a word.’²⁹ Even though today the end of humankind has entered the sphere of possibility and even though man himself is responsible for this, the psyche removes the thought of this possibility, thus preventing fear from arising. Hence, we are illiterate in fear – ‘Analphabeten der Angst’ – and ‘if one had to seek a motto for our age, the most appropriate thing to call it would be “the era of the inability to feel fear”’.³⁰

6.2 Denial and Self-Deception

Anders’s diagnosis concerning the anaesthetizing of fear and the imbalance between knowing and feeling seems to find a perfect correspondence in that distinctive defence mechanism that Freud defined as ‘denial of reality’.³¹

More complex and subtle than repression (*Verdrängung*), which indicates the operation with which the subject pushes particular representations linked to an instinct to the unconscious, and which for Freud becomes a sort of prototype of defence mechanisms, denial (*Verleugnung*) causes the Self, despite rationally recognizing a painful and difficult situation, to prevent this reaching the emotional sphere.³² In other words, while repression is a defence against *internal instinctual demands*, denial is a defence against the claims of *external reality*,³³ which is *rationaly* recognized, but not *emotionally* felt or participated. This converts into that distinctive ambivalence of ‘knowing and not-knowing’ which, as has recently been

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 268–69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 269.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 265.

³¹ For the Freudian concepts and reference to the texts, the volume by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), originally published as *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1967) is still valid. On the topic of ‘denial’ in the social perspective, see my “Distrittività e autoconservazione in età nucleare,” in *Immagini dell’impensabile. Ricerche interdisciplinari sulla guerra nucleare*, ed. Elena Pulcini and Patrizia Messeri (Genoa: Marietti, 1991). On ‘defence mechanisms’, with particular attention to ‘denial’ see Stefania Nicasi, *Meccanismi di difesa. Studio su Freud* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1981).

³² ‘[...] one has at the same time an affirmation and a negation, since the repressed is recognized by intelligence but it is not yet accepted emotionally. In this sense there is also a split.’ Nicasi, *Meccanismi di difesa*, 138, own translation.

³³ See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 29.

stressed, pertains to denial³⁴; an ambivalence that Anders had already picked up on and clearly denounced. As he repeated:

We cannot deny that we 'know' what the consequences of an atomic war would be. But we only 'know' it. And this 'only' indicates that this 'knowledge' of ours remains extremely close to not knowing or at least to not understanding [...].³⁵

In his recent sociological valuation of the concept of 'denial', Stanley Cohen stresses this ambivalence, pointing this out as the most interesting side of the concept,³⁶ and above all the most suited to accounting for a series of phenomena that characterize contemporary reality. Explicitly drawing from psychoanalysis, whose worth he acknowledges – if nothing else against the reductive simplifications of cognitive psychology³⁷ – as more than any other approach having grasped the elusive quality of the concept of denial, Cohen offers a definition that first of all takes into account the meaning that is more general and common to the various forms:

[...] people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information "registers" well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away.³⁸

On the basis of this premise, Cohen analyses the many forms of denial. It can occur in good faith or be deliberate and intentional; it changes in relation to the subjects' different positions, that is, whether they are victims, guilty parties or witnesses; it depends on how the object is evaluated, which can be expressed through a simple refusal to acknowledge the facts, through a different interpretation or through a rationalization that aims to prevent its psychological, political and moral implications. But the most disconcerting and problematic form, since it can affect whole cultures – as is the case today – is what makes the subjects of the denial aware and unaware at the same time, that is, placed on the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness. Here they do have access to the reality, but in such a way as to ignore it since it is too frightening or painful, or simply too unpleasant to accept. 'We are vaguely aware,' Cohen says, 'of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don't know.'³⁹ For example, much more than the intentional denial which is often

³⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, I, 269–70.

³⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial*.

³⁷ 'The cognitive revolution of the last thirty years has removed all traces of Freudian and other motivational theories. If you distort the external world, this means that your faculties of information processing and rational decision making are faulty.' (Ibid., 42).

³⁸ Ibid., 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 5. Moreover, this is the core of the Freudian concept, which evidently presupposes the idea of splitting the ego (*Ichspaltung*): 'Freud,' says Cohen, 'was fascinated by the idea that awkward facts of life could be handled by simultaneous acceptance and disavowal. They are too threatening to confront, but impossible to ignore. The compromise solution is to deny and acknowledge them at the same time.' (Ibid., 27).

implemented by political actors and institutional authorities to cover up regrettable facts and unpopular decisions, this is the frame of mind that most interests us and disturbs us because it can explain the widespread and paradoxical indifference with which common people react to situations of suffering, atrocities and violence.⁴⁰ Tellingly, the focus of Cohen's whole and documented analysis seems to be the figure of the 'passive bystander' who, when faced with other people's suffering (whether this is experienced in a direct manner like a rape or episode of bullying, or is distant like genocide or torture), defensively withdraws from all involvement, pretending not to see and not to know, inhibiting emotional reactions, minimizing the event's capacity or changing channel if the information is transmitted through mass media images. Hence the bystander withdraws from facing up to painful and embarrassing situations and avoids all possible mobilization. Therefore, Cohen seems, quite rightly, to rediscover denial above all as a reaction of defence in the face of *other people's* suffering where this assumes such proportions as not to be acceptable by the psyche. As a consequence, he finds it to be the root of the emotional indifference that today seems to be permeating contemporary societies. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Anders's reflection allows us to grasp another aspect of denial that sharpens its paradoxical nature, since it concerns the tendency to ignore, wipe out or minimize something that not only concerns *other people's* destinies, but that threatens our own lives: like in the exemplary case of denying the global challenge *par excellence*, the nuclear risk.

Consistent with Anders's diagnosis, a few decades ago the psychoanalysis of war had already reflected on the radical changes caused by the nuclear threat with respect to the traditional forms of war conflict, and hence explained, more or less indirectly, the psychic roots of this specific case of denial. While underlining the abstract or phantasmal nature of the danger at the objective level – due to the invisibility and intangibility of nuclear weapons, the distance of the target, as well as the bureaucratic 'normality' of those who hold the actual decision-making power – some authors have singled out the unprecedented nature of the nuclear conflict in its split and autonomization from the individual's instinctual sphere.⁴¹ That is, unlike traditional war, based on mobilizing aggressive instincts, nuclear war (its destructive potential) appears as a mechanical event, or rather, a psychologically unreal event, in which the 'enemy' himself, far from being the object of projective dynamics, becomes an inanimate abstraction with whom all emotional bonds are lost.⁴² This sort of 'dehumanization' of war, which affects the relationship with the other and the relationship with oneself to the same extent, thereby producing its

⁴⁰ 'The grey areas between consciousness and unconsciousness are far more significant in explaining ordinary public responses to knowledge about atrocities and suffering' (ibid., 6).

⁴¹ Leon Botstein, "Freud on War and Death: Thoughts from a Nuclear Perspective," *Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Thought* 7, no. 3 (1984) and Franco Fornari, *Psicoanalisi della guerra atomica* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1964).

⁴² See ibid. See also Günther Anders, "Die Antiquiertheit des Hassens," in *Hass. Die Macht eines unerwünschten Gefühls*, ed. Renate Kahle, Heiner Menzner and Gerhard Vinnai (Rowolt: Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1985).

‘devitalization’,⁴³ is at the root, together with the enormity of the risk and the impossibility to ‘think the unthinkable’,⁴⁴ of the denial of the danger, which immunizes individuals from emotional involvement, and, therefore, from true awareness. It is telling that, in addition to denial, Martin Wanh spoke of a ‘narcissistic withdrawal’,⁴⁵ as he alluded to the entropic and self-defensive strategy of individuals reduced to passive and indifferent ‘spectators’ of events. Individuals who, with respect to events, preclude any form of effective reaction and thus inhibit the insurgence of fear at the outset.

I will return to the ‘spectator phenomenon’ shortly.⁴⁶ As I have already hinted, this phenomenon is one of the most disturbing pathologies of contemporary individualism. First, however, it is interesting to dwell on one of the – so to speak – *more active* variants of denial, which consists not only of withdrawal from a reality that is uncomfortable or painful for the psyche, sheltering in a sort of emotional indifference, but of lying to ourselves in order to believe something that does not respond to our rational evaluations, but to our desires. This is *self-deception*, a defence mechanism that has tellingly been defined as ‘the most extreme form of the paradox of irrationality’.⁴⁷

Without going into the (at times muddled) analytical controversies relating to a concept that is without doubt slippery and problematic,⁴⁸ we can, however, try to sum up the characteristics – shared by many authors – which prove fruitful in further extending the picture relating to the metamorphosis of fear in the global age. Self-deception is what pushes individuals to form a belief that contrasts with the information and proof at their disposal, since their *desires* end up interfering with their vision of reality and cause them to act in a different way from what their rational judgement would suggest. In other words, it consists of believing something because one desires it to be true,⁴⁹ hence it converges, despite some differences, with

⁴³ Martin Wanh speaks of ‘dehumanization’ and ‘devitalization’ (meant as the impoverishment of the ability to feel) in ‘Narcissism in Our Time: Some Psychoanalytic Reflections on Its Genesis,’ *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 52 (1983).

⁴⁴ The allusion is to the text by Herman Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962).

⁴⁵ Martin Wanh, “The Nuclear Threat: Its Impact on Psychoanalytic Conceptualizations,” *Psychoanalytical Inquiry*, no. 6 (1986).

⁴⁶ The expression (*Zuschauer-Phänomen*) is by Martin Wanh, “Die Herrschaft des Thanatos,” in *Zur Psychoanalyse der Nuklearen Drohung. Vorträge einer Tagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychotherapie, Psychosomatik und Tiefenpsychologie*, ed. Carl Nedelmann (Göttingen: Verlag für medizinische Psychologie, 1985).

⁴⁷ David Pears, “The Goals and Strategies of Self-Deception,” in *The Multiple Self*, ed. Elster, 60; Giovanni Jervis, *Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993) and Massimo Marraffa, “Il problema dell’autoinganno: una guida per il lettore,” *Sistemi intelligenti*, no. 3 (1999): 373–403.

⁴⁸ ‘[...] self-deception,’ Davidson says, ‘is a problem for philosophical psychology. For in thinking about self-deception, as in thinking about other forms of irrationality, we find ourselves tempted by opposing thoughts.’ (Donald Davidson, “Deception and Division,” in *The Multiple Self*, ed. Elster, 79).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

the dynamic of wishful thinking.⁵⁰ Like denial, meant in its pure form, so to speak, self-deception implies *Ichspaltung*, no matter what name may be given to what Freud identified as the splitting of the ego.⁵¹ Finally, like denial, it is an ambivalent phenomenon since it acts in that threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness which, as Cohen stresses in this case too, creates a paradoxical situation of knowing and not-knowing.⁵²

But while denial appears, as we have seen, effective in explaining the lack of perception and the anaesthetizing of fear in the face of the nuclear threat, self-deception can prove pertinent in order to understand the complex emotional response that individuals give to the other global risk already brought up above: that is, the twofold environmental risk of global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer, which by no means seems to generate that mobilization of the whole of humankind which it would instead – urgently – require.⁵³ From this point of view, the recently proposed definition of ‘global risks in the making’ or ‘potentially global’ risks, which tends to distinguish them from the global risk *par excellence* represented by nuclear power,⁵⁴ can prove to be extremely useful in explaining the however blurred difference in the subject’s reaction and in further enlightening the phenomenology of fear. The indefinite nature that without doubt also pertains to the nuclear risk is greatly stressed here, due to the fact that global warming and depletion of the ozone layer have wider margins of uncertainty created by their inertial nature, the impossibility to measure and foresee their future development, and therefore to calculate with certainty, together with their possible effects, the last deadline for possible countermeasures. Their ungraspable and invisible nature, further fuelled by the difficulty to point the finger of blame mean that, in spite of the alarming international reports on the climate and reliable scientific forecasts on the devastating future damage, moreover given increasing mass media coverage, individuals mostly seem

⁵⁰ In *Paradoxes of Irrationality* (in Richard A. Wollheim and James Hopkins, eds., *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)), Davidson upholds that in wishful thinking desire produces a belief without providing any proof in its favour, so that in this case the belief is evidently irrational. However, he underlines the differences between self-denial and wishful thinking: unlike the second, the first requires the agent’s intervention, that is, the agent has to ‘do’ something to change his way of seeing things; in the second the belief always takes the direction of positive effect, never of negative, while in the first the thought that it triggers can be painful (see ‘Deception and Division’, 85ff.).

⁵¹ In this connection Pears speaks of ‘functional insulation’, “Goals and Strategies of Self-Deception”, 71; Davidson speaks of ‘boundaries’: “[...] I postulate such a boundary somewhere between any (obviously) conflicting beliefs. Such boundaries are not discovered by introspection; they are conceptual aids to the coherent description of genuine irrationalities.” “Deception and Division”, 91–92. On self-denial and splitting of the ego, see Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (London: Henley-Routledge, 1969).

⁵² See Cohen, *States of Denial*, 37ff.

⁵³ It is important to point out that the second problem (the one relating to the risk of ozone layer depletion) nevertheless found some solutions as of the Montreal Protocol in 1987, made possible due to the fact that they did not require costs or relinquishments in terms of economics or lifestyle.

⁵⁴ D’Andrea, “Rischi ambientali globali e aporie della modernità”.

to fail to suitably perceive the phenomenon. Instead, it is often shrugged off with detached irony towards the excessive catastrophism, with resigned declarations of impotence, or the expression of enlightened trust in the capacities of technology to repair the situation.⁵⁵ In other words, despite being rationally known and recognized, the risk does not produce such emotional involvement as to give rise to effective answers. At most it produces a widespread and generic feeling of anxiety which ends up imploding, sucked in by the much more real worries of everyday life.

The causes of this paradoxical situation can be traced first of all to within the same dynamic of fear of which, as I will recall, Hobbes's diagnosis had grasped an essential aspect. Namely, fear as a necessary and vital passion that allows us to respond to the immediate danger (of death) loses its efficacy when the danger, and the damage it could cause, are shifted to the future, that is, when a time gap inserts itself between the present action (based on destructive passions) and its possible consequences. Thus all certainty and inexorability are taken away from the evil, enabling individuals to imagine it as a remote and avoidable possibility, for which it makes no sense to mobilize themselves immediately. In other words, in this case, fear does not manage to overcome the passions of the present. Hobbes's intuition is all the more valid in the case of global risks, whose possible damage is even more remote and does not concern current individuals, but future generations. That is, fear does not have the strength to change present action (and therefore the underlying desires and passions) when the damage that this action can cause is not an evil for ourselves but for 'others': anonymous, generic and distant in time. In short, by weakening fear, the future nature of the damage makes it easy for essentially self-preserving and narcissistic individuals to deceive themselves as to the actual entity of the risk and therefore to minimize or deny the possible consequences. In this case, the aim is not so much for individuals to defend themselves emotionally from events that are too painful to bear (like in the case of nuclear conflict), but to carry on with a manner of acting that allows them to legitimize and satisfy their current desires, preserve their lifestyles and not lose consolidated privileges.

To once again recall the pathologies of the global Self, we could say that the acquisitive voracity of *homo creator*, orientated towards unlimited growth, combines with the parasitic bent of a *consumer individual* anchored solely to the present, to prevent access – through the cunning of self-deception – to a correct perception of the catastrophic effects of climate change, global warming, the greenhouse effect and depletion of the ozone layer. This appears all the more paradoxical where these effects start to be dramatically visible: tropicalization of the climate, desertification, destruction of the ecosystem, lethal viruses and infective diseases are no longer only remote possibilities but the disturbing proof of environmental risks. By now scattered all over the planet,⁵⁶ they affect whole geographical

⁵⁵ See Denis Duclos, ed., *Pourquoi tardons-nous tant à devenir écologistes? Limites de la postmodernité et société écologique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

⁵⁶ Namely, they are already globalized risks, see D'Andrea, "Rischi ambientali globali e aporie della modernità", 45ff.

areas and populations, damaging the illusion of individuals and states' immunity more and more. Indeed, despite not just abstract information and forecasts, but a more and more invasive state of affairs that is starting to concern them at close quarters, guaranteed and supported by the instrumental interests of local politics and the global economy, individuals prefer to deceive themselves in order not to pay the costs of relinquishing their current desires, assets and pleasures; further eased, in this self-defensive operation, by the morally innocent, innocuous and banally everyday nature of the action that produces the risks.⁵⁷ Moreover, the absence of a 'productive' fear, inhibited by denial and self-deception, is not belied by the cyclical outbursts of panic and collective hysteria in the face of the sudden appearance of threats (as has always been the case, from Chernobyl, to SARS and bird flu). On the contrary, the absence and the excess of fear are nothing but two sides of the same coin,⁵⁸ the two extreme and 'unproductive' manifestations of what I defined as *global fear*.

6.3 Spectators and Victims

Both denial and self-deception leave individuals in the passive position of *spectators* of events. Thus they are enclosed in the *immunitarian* circuit of a *self-defensive and self-preserving* individualism which anaesthetizes fear and is incapable of converting into effective action, practice or political participation.

Alongside the two extroverted pathologies, so to speak, of unlimited individualism, represented by the insatiable voracity of the *consumer* individual and the omnipotence of *homo creator*, appears a third, paradoxically introverted configuration, namely a passive and impotent individual, who helplessly watches the destructive effects of his own action, over which he seems to have lost all capacity for orientation and control. Against the loss of objective spaces of protection and security, increasingly eroded by the global diffusion of the risks, he seems to seek shelter, as I have already hinted,⁵⁹ in a sort of *interior immunity*, entrenching himself in the emotional indifference that is just one of the many manifestations of narcissism. In addition, the yearning for immunity becomes more tenacious and obstinate the more it is felt to be ineffective and illusory. Thus a new condition is outlined, which to recall the metaphorical figures proposed by Hans Blumenberg in his *Shipwreck with Spectator*,⁶⁰ is neither the premodern and 'Lucretian' condition of the spectator watching the shipwreck from a safe place, sheltered from the danger, nor the modern and 'Pascalian' condition of being the actors of our own lives,

⁵⁷ Environmental risks, says Beck, are 'the *stowaways of normal consumption*'. (*Risk Society*, 40).

⁵⁸ 'The risk society shifts from hysteria to indifference and vice versa.' (*Ibid.*, 37).

⁵⁹ See Part I, Chap. 2.

⁶⁰ Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*.

'être embarqués', involved in the things of the world and ready to put ourselves at stake first of all by recognizing the constitutive precariousness of the human condition and accepting the very risk of existence.

While modernity had ratified the decline of the spectator figure, and enhanced the moments of practice and action, involvement and commitment; and while late modernity had radicalized his condemnation by emphasizing the need to expose oneself to risk and accept the uncertainty and fluidity of the human condition,⁶¹ the global age seems to be objectively bringing the spectator up-to-date, which nevertheless coincides with a deep and disturbing change with respect to the figure of the Lucretian wise man. The erosion of boundaries and disappearance of an 'elsewhere' – redrawing global space, cancelling out the distinction between inside and out – is turning into the loss of free areas from where the shipwreck can be observed. At this point, due to the end of every real guarantee of immunity, deprived of the possibility of a safe harbour where he can feel sheltered from the world's dangers, the global Self withdraws into the only space apparently able to protect him from events and threats that he is not able to deal with: namely, the wholly interior space of *an emotional indifference, an anaesthetizing of emotions*, generated by implementing sophisticated and for the most part unconscious defence mechanisms. In other words, the spectator figure is undergoing a process of *interiorization*, which replaces the spatial distance from the shipwreck and the contemplative safety of the Lucretian subject with the apathetical extraneousness and obstinate blindness of he who refuses to recognize the very risk of the shipwreck, and encloses himself in the entropic space of an inert solitude.

Moreover, the spectator phenomenon seems to pervade the whole social structure, due to the spectacularization of reality that, as Jacques Debord had already masterfully diagnosed a few decades ago, deeply upsets the very nature of social relations.⁶² By denouncing the erosion of the boundaries between real and virtual and the pervasive power of images (mass media images first of all), and by diagnosing life's 'total colonization' by commodification processes and the indistinctive overlapping of true and false as the effects of the 'society of the spectacle', Debord had indeed grasped the spectator figure as the symptom and symbol of a new form of alienation that invades the individual's whole relationship with the world. Passiveness and submission to the totalitarianism of images, prioritization of appearance, loss of contact with one's desires and genuine needs, atomism and isolation are among the most evident and disturbing characteristics of the spectator-individual, who thus ends up losing all capacity to be involved and to grasp reality.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, chap. 5; see also Bodei, Introduction ('Distanza di sicurezza') to the Italian edition of Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Naufragio con spettatore* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 16–18.

⁶² Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Eastbourne: Soul Bay Press, 2009), originally published as *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet, 1967); Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1990), originally published as *Commentaires sur La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1988).

In short, the emotional indifference in which individuals shelter in order to cancel out the awareness of the risks surrounding them, unconsciously implementing powerful defence mechanisms, seems to be a sort of inevitable outcome of a widespread anthropological condition. Or rather, it seems to be the extreme form of a general tendency towards apathy and inertia, produced by a spectacular society that empties reality of its contents and thus deprives individuals of pathos and action. Suffice it to think of the de-realizing effects, with respect to the effective drama of events, produced by mass media images (for example the first Gulf War),⁶³ or the narcotizing addiction that they cause to dangers and catastrophes of all kinds (from tsunamis to SARS). The images deprive events of the flesh and blood of the experience and neutralize them in the aseptic and equalizing space of the screen.

However, the problem today is no longer the subject's passivization and atomization alone, nor his a-pathetical detachment from reality: aspects which, moreover, sociological reflection on narcissism had already underlined some time ago, and to which the most recent and sagacious sociological diagnoses do not fail to draw attention.⁶⁴ The problem, as we have seen, regards above all the *negation* of reality and the possible destructive effects of this denial on the very survival of individuals and the whole of humankind. By withdrawing into the immunitarian space of a self-defensive apathy, the global *spectator* performs a dangerously illusory operation which precludes the possibility to perceive and understand what the unprecedented risk of the global age is: namely, that he himself is the potential *victim* of events from which there is no shelter, or rather, from which there is no other possible shelter than active and universal mobilization.⁶⁵ While it may be true that the hallmark of global challenges is that they cross boundaries and no perimeter can be drawn around or circumscribe them, it is also true that everyone, in every corner of the planet, is always potentially exposed to their effects, that everyone is always potentially a victim of a shipwreck which, for the first time, could affect and sweep away humankind and all living beings.

By anaesthetizing fear, the denial (and self-deception) strategy paradoxically ends up betraying the very same purpose that it had been implemented for: namely, self-preservation. Or rather, in order to pursue an entropic and defensive self-preservation that preserves them from all emotional and active involvement, not only are individuals undermining the quality of their lives, but the very preservation of humankind and the world.

⁶³ See Antonio Scurati, *Televisioni di guerra. Il conflitto del Golfo come evento mediatico e il paradosso dello spettatore totale* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2003), who observes how the increase in media exposure of the war phenomenon corresponds to a lesser ability, on the part of the spectator, to grasp its reality. As a result, on the part of the citizen there is less possibility to decide and act. In other words, the 'total visibility' offered by the television medium corresponds, in an only apparent paradox, to the blindness and impotence of the 'total spectator'.

⁶⁴ See Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 63ff.; Adriano Zamperini, *Psicologia dell'inerzia e della solidarietà* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001); Magatti, *L'io globale*. On this topic see Part I.

⁶⁵ On the obsolescence of the Lucretian model proposed by Blumenberg, see Cerutti, *Global Challenges*, chap. V.

This unwillingly nihilistic outcome could perhaps be interpreted as a radical and extreme manifestation of the *immunitarian paradigm* recognized as the very emblem of modernity, owing to which the preservation of life is paradoxically turned around into its negation.⁶⁶ However, what I would like to stress, to go back to Anders's diagnosis, is the fact that – in this case at least – this worrying reversal originates in the pathologies of feeling and the denial of fear, which prevent individuals from recognizing their paradoxical condition of *spectators and victims* at the same time.

6.4 Projection of Fear and the Scapegoat's Ineffectiveness

Denial, however, is just one of the unproductive metamorphoses of fear in the global age, and only one of the strategies that the global individual uses to contrast the anxious perception of new risks. Denial sums up the *individualistic and impulsive* response to the indefinite and unintentional threats produced by techno-economic globalization.

In parallel to this there emerges, as I had mentioned, another defence strategy, which responds to what is perceived as the second, fundamental source of danger, essentially generated by economic-cultural globalization: that is, defence against the *other*. This strategy is specular to the first since it converts more into an excess rather than an absence of fear, and I have suggested defining it as *communitarian and explosive*.⁶⁷ It is based on reducing insecurity and indefiniteness through the defence mechanism of *projection*: namely, the fear is displaced onto indirect and specious objects since these appear easier to define and identify. Many of the ethno-religious conflicts that are traversing the planet can at least in part be traced back to this basic defence mechanism which converts indefinite anxiety into definite fear.

In this case too, we are dealing with a strategy that is anything but new since, as we will see, it results in the classic mechanism of building a 'scapegoat'. However, the novelty lies in the fact that, like in the denial strategy, this strategy seems to be resulting in substantial *ineffectiveness*. If, as suggested to us by René Girard's enlightening diagnosis, the fundamental goal of creating scapegoats has always been, since the origins of civilization, to keep check on and resolve violence in defence of a given community, today we are instead faced with an escalation in violence which attests to the substantial failure of the scapegoat dynamic. Through a fascinating thesis that I can only briefly recall here,⁶⁸ Girard claims that in truth this loss of effectiveness has distant roots, since it coincides with the end of the processes which made violence ritual and sacred, and with the revelation of the

⁶⁶ See Esposito, *Immunitas*.

⁶⁷ Here there is a generic allusion to Bauman's 'explosive communities' in *Liquid Modernity*.

⁶⁸ Of great use for the issues that follow is the essay by Stefano Tomelleri, "Il capro espiatorio. La rivelazione cristiana e la modernità," *Studi perugini*, no. 10 (2000): 147–57.

victimage mechanism brought on by the advent of Christianity.⁶⁹ In other words, while archaic societies had entrusted the rite of sacrificing the scapegoat with the function of providing a remedy to internal violence in order to found and preserve social order and peaceful coexistence among men, the revelation of Christ radically damaged this mechanism since, by disclosing the victim's innocence, for the first time it made people aware of the victimizing and persecutory dynamics. By unmasking the nexus between violence and the sacred, the Christian message led to the breakdown of the mythical-ritual universe, and placed people before the unavoidable truth of their violence. Thus it weakened the possibility of resolving the violence through the sacrificial mechanism and opened totally new scenarios, affected by a fundamental ambivalence. On one hand, by depriving men of all external justification for their violence, the Christian revelation of the victim's innocence opened up the possibility of renouncing the scapegoat logic and resolving the problem of the social bond, without any exclusion or sacrifice; on the other hand, in the absence of ritual antidotes and their power to create order, it exposed men to the spreading of violence and the persistence – in more ambiguous, disguised and clandestine forms – of the victimage mechanism.

That this second scenario is the one which, unfortunately, has ended up prevailing is manifestly undeniable; and, paradoxically, it can be pinpointed as originating above all in modernity. While it may be true that modernity – the time of rights, democracy and equality – seems to offer the possibility of transforming violence into 'soft', peaceful and even emancipatory forms of competition and rivalry, it is also true that, for the same reasons, it can provide a breeding ground which favours the heightening of violence. Indeed modernity produces an amplification of the *mimetic dynamic* that Girard recognized as the constitutive source of violent conflictuality among men. As has been underlined, the same equality that, à la Tocqueville, can be interpreted as a loss of differences, frees the mimetic desire, which becomes unlimited⁷⁰ and inevitably exacerbates rivalry among people. In other words, in a society of equals the *desire to be according to the other* which pushes the mimetic actor to see the other as model and rival at the same time, triggers a spiral of competitive comparison. Even the smallest difference becomes the opportunity for resentment, envy and hate, and can always provide the opportunity for violent clashes.

While on one hand democratic indifferentiation and, we could add, narcissistic and postmodern intolerance towards every difference – which Tocqueville had prophetically diagnosed⁷¹ – provoke the continuance of rivalry and conflict, on the other hand the sacrificial dynamic, to which premodern societies had entrusted the function of keeping check on violence, seems to have lost its traditional efficacy due to

⁶⁹ On this topic, which is at the centre of all his reflection, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), originally published as *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972) and Girard, *The Scapegoat*.

⁷⁰ Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *L'enfer des choses. René Girard et la logique de l'économie* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 59.

⁷¹ For a broader treatment of this topic see my *Individual Without Passions*, chap. 4.

its irreversible disclosure. This means that modern and contemporary societies are exposed to a radical 'crisis of the sacrificial system' which, since it is impossible to find a solution in the scapegoat mechanism, can result in a multiplication of violence and its manifestation in increasingly crude and destructive forms.⁷²

The loss of the victimage mechanism's efficacy, due to the deritualization process, does not equate to its disappearance, however. On the contrary, Girard once again observes that phenomena of 'sacrificial substitutions' reappear 'in a shameful, furtive, and clandestine manner' so as to avert moral condemnation (and self-condemnation).⁷³ They take on the shape of psychological violence which is easier to conceal, or they re-explode in the exacerbated form of immolating victims to evil ideologies, as was the case of the genocides in the twentieth century.

These mechanisms continue in our world usually as only a trace, but occasionally they can also reappear in forms more virulent than ever and on an enormous scale. An example is Hitler's systematic destruction of European Jews, and we see this also in all the other genocides and near genocides that occurred in the twentieth century.⁷⁴

Of course the reference to the Nazi genocide is not random, but extremely emblematic of the modern and contemporary reappearance of the victimage mechanism in spite of its disclosure. A first formulation of this can be found in the diagnosis of totalitarianism that Franz Neumann was already suggesting in the 1950s, as he traced its psychic origins back to the transformation of fear into 'persecutory anxiety'.⁷⁵ Every time, Neumann says, over the course of history a particular social group (whether it can be defined on the basis of class, religion or race) feels threatened by objective dangers which, together with material survival, compromise its prestige and identity, the deriving anxiety is displaced onto groups and people, who are given the requirements *ad hoc*,⁷⁶ and the guilt made to converge on them. If we are to take up the Freudian distinction between 'realistic anxiety' and 'neurotic anxiety',⁷⁷ Neumann shows how fear and uncertainty are transformed into persecutory anxiety through the projective and hence specious creation of an enemy who

⁷² See in particular René Girard, in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Continuum, 1987), 34 and 260. Originally published as *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978).

⁷³ 'We haven't given up having scapegoats, but our belief in them is 90 percent spoiled. The phenomenon appears so morally base to us, so reprehensible, that when we catch ourselves "letting off steam" against someone innocent, we are ashamed of ourselves.' (Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books/Ottawa: Novalis; Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2001), 156–57. Originally published as *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (Paris: Grasset, 1999)).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 158–59.

⁷⁵ Franz Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics," (1957) in *Democratic and Authoritarian State* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 270–95.

⁷⁶ In choosing the assumed enemy as the guilty party, Neumann says, there must always be a core of truth that makes this choice particularly dangerous: so in the case of the Jews, the core of truth is given by their being 'concrete symbols of a so-called parasitical capitalism, through their position in commerce and finance' (*Anxiety and Politics*, 287).

⁷⁷ On this see Part II, Chap. 5, Sect. 5.3.

becomes the subject of hate and aggression. As a result, the masses threatened with disintegration can rediscover their internal cohesion. In the case of Nazism and the persecution of the Jews, political and ideological manipulation linked up to this social dynamic, took advantage of the mass anxiety and pushed the masses towards 'caesaristic' and regressive identification⁷⁸ with a leader libidinally attributed the task of resolving the anxiety by expelling the evil and its presumed carriers.⁷⁹ By recognizing the victimage mechanism as originating in the persecutory transformation of anxiety, Neumann allows us to see its emotional roots, which Girard evidently considers less essential for his so-to-speak ontological diagnosis of violence. However, at the same time, while Neumann particularly stresses the totalitarian outcomes of the scapegoat dynamic,⁸⁰ Girard underlines its persistence in 'all the phenomena of nonritualized collective transference that we observe or believe we observe around us.'⁸¹ Although deritualized – and indeed all the more violent for this precise reason – the victimage mechanism continues to act in the same modern democratic societies in all creeping and disguised phenomena of exclusion and discrimination, or in the cyclical explosions of reciprocal aggression and disdain that are fuelled by identity conflicts:

We easily see now that scapegoats multiply wherever human groups seek to lock themselves into a given identity – communal, local, national, ideological, racial, religious, and so on.⁸²

Evidently, here we are coming back to the topic of identity conflict which, as we have seen, is proliferating inside and outside the West, bringing the scapegoat strategy back up-to-date: a strategy which becomes all the more aggressive the more the perception of the threat grows in a global society. By eroding territorial and cultural boundaries, globalization is producing, first of all in Western societies, a disturbing proximity of the other. As a result, the other can increasingly be identified with the Simmelian figure of the 'stranger within', who challenges the order and cohesion of a given community through a swarming and liminal presence that is felt, as suggested

⁷⁸ Neumann stresses the regressive nature of this identification mechanism for the very masses who implement it, since it involves alienation and the relinquishment of one's Self: 'Since the identification of the masses with the leader is an alienation of the individual member, identification always constitutes a regression'. (*Anxiety and Politics*, 277).

⁷⁹ 'Caesaristic identifications may play a role in history when the situation of masses is objectively endangered, when the masses are incapable of understanding the historical process, and when the anxiety activated by the danger becomes neurotic persecutory (aggressive) anxiety through manipulation.' (*Ibid.*, 278–79).

⁸⁰ It is interesting to see how Neumann indeed also alludes to the unconscious nature of the persecutory dynamic: 'Hatred, resentment, dread, created by great upheavals, are concentrated on certain persons who are denounced as devilish conspirators. Nothing would be more incorrect than to characterize the enemies as scapegoats [...] for they appear as genuine enemies whom one must extirpate and not as substitutes whom one only needs to send into the wilderness.' (*Ibid.*, 279).

⁸¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 160.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 160.

by Mary Douglas, as potentially contaminating. Coming forth in response to the siege of a hybrid and unstemmable multitude that is penetrating the protected spaces of our identity citadels is the ancestral fear of a 'contamination' endangering the need for 'purity' upon which, Douglas says, every culture and civilization builds its reassuring separations and classifications.⁸³

The other (the stranger, he who is different, the migrant, the illegal immigrant) becomes the target upon whom to displace our fears, upon whom to project a *persecutory anxiety* that transforms him into the person responsible for the dangers threatening a society that is increasingly deprived of the traditional control structures.⁸⁴ Hence this enables that *blaming* process which is indispensable for social cohesion and which, however, the anarchic and anonymous logic of globalization seems to be progressively eroding.⁸⁵ But since it is no longer possible to rely on ritual expulsion practices or strategies to confine the other to a spatial and territorial *elsewhere* clearly divided by a definite boundary that traces the separation between an inside and an outside, the exclusion mechanism becomes *interiorized* and acts at an eminently symbolic level. The exclusion dynamic, as has been underlined, is shifted into the conscience: 'Defence and exclusion, no longer possible towards the outside, will be shifted into the conscience, the imagination, the social mythologies and into the self-evident that these hold up.'⁸⁶ Thus immunity is ensured through dehumanization processes that transform the stranger within (the *metoikos*) into an 'inside being' in such a way that he remains an 'outside being' all the same.⁸⁷

All this can take place in the insidious and hidden forms of psychological violence and everyday discrimination towards those who have crossed the territorial boundaries of a state and broken the taboo of distance and separation, therefore representing a constant challenge to consolidated privileges and to the 'purity' of identity. Or it can occur through cyclical collective mobilization against the weak and marginalized in the attempt to deal with insecurity by displacing the fear onto problems of personal safety, which politics does not then hesitate to exploit, in self-legitimation, in the name of defending public order.⁸⁸ But, as we have already seen, it can also convert into a real and proper 'attack on the minorities', in which it is perhaps legitimate to recognize, as suggested by Arjun Appadurai, the distinctive form of violence spreading to the global level. When global insecurity is added to the delirious fantasy of national purity which Appadurai defines as an 'anxiety of

⁸³ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

⁸⁴ In this connection, Mary Douglas underlines that risk itself becomes a resource at the moral and political level and speaks of a 'forensic theory of danger': 'Disasters that befoul the air and soil and poison the water are generally turned to political account: someone already unpopular is going to be blamed for it.' (*Risk and Blame*, 5). On the same subject, Zygmunt Bauman speaks of the creation of 'substitute targets' upon which to unload our fears: see *Liquid Fear*.

⁸⁵ See Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.

⁸⁶ Escobar, *Metamorfosi della paura*, 156, own translation.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 202, own translation.

⁸⁸ See Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 45ff. and Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 144ff.

incompleteness', the majorities in every single state whose hegemony is threatened tend to transform into 'predatory identities'. Their aim becomes to defend the purity of the *ethnos* by eliminating the element of disturbance represented by the 'minor differences'. The minorities 'are embarrassments to any state-sponsored image of national purity and state fairness. They are thus scapegoats in the classical sense.' More specifically in the global age they 'are the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few megastates, of unruly economic flows and compromised sovereignties.'⁸⁹ From Iraq to ex-Yugoslavia, from Indonesia to Chechnya, from Palestine to Rwanda, to the emblematic case of the clash between Hindus and Muslims within a modern democracy like India, the victimage mechanism seems to reassert itself with a fresh violence that tellingly – testimony to the obsession with purity at its origin – seems to repeat itself in particular towards the *body*. Indeed, as Appadurai underlines by taking on Douglas's perspective, the body becomes subject to unheard-of violations and atrocities (bodies massacred, decapitated, tortured, raped) in view of punishing the minorities for the fact that they 'blur the boundaries between "us" and "them," here and there, in and out, healthy and unhealthy, loyal and disloyal, needed but unwelcome.'⁹⁰

Nevertheless, it is precisely this obsessive, punitive and purificatory nature that announces the danger that the violence may assume an unstemmable drift.⁹¹ Far from producing a stop to the violence, the scapegoat strategy causes its proliferation, through a sort of perverse up-the-ante that seems to bring the brutality of archaic practices, such as sacrifice, and of the starkest materiality back inside the abstract and impersonal space of globalization.⁹² But that is not all. Today the spiral of violence is further fuelled by a new factor that upsets the logic – to date essentially one-way – of the persecutors-victims relationship. What happens, unlike for example the emblematic case of Nazism, is that the *other* tries to overturn his position as victim, and in turn becomes the persecutor, giving rise to a dynamic of hostility and aggression that potentially becomes unlimited owing to its reciprocal and specular nature. Suffice it to think of Islamic terrorism and the projection it puts upon the West as the image of the other and evil, against which, by fuelling passions of *resentment*,⁹³ a compact and endogamous *Us* is condensed

⁸⁹ 'Minorities, in a word,' Appadurai continues, 'are metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project. And it is this betrayal – actually rooted in the failure of the nation-state to preserve its promise to be the guarantor of national sovereignty – that underwrites the worldwide impulse to extrude or to eliminate minorities.' (*Fear of Small Numbers*, 42–43).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹¹ See Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Originally published as *Orrorismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007).

⁹² Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, chap. 3 again underlines the nexus between the abstract logic of globalization and the brutality of physical violence.

⁹³ On 'resentment' see René Girard, "Camus's Stranger Retried," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 79 (1964): 519–33; for an interesting treatment of the topic see Stefano Tomelleri, *La società del risentimento* (Rome: Meltemi, 2004).

together and built. Indeed this proves the fact that the scapegoat, as Girard warns, is not only necessarily embodied in the weak and oppressed but also in the rich and powerful.⁹⁴

Hence, in the grip of *dehumanization* on one hand and *demonization* on the other,⁹⁵ the world becomes a theatre, through the reciprocal invention of an enemy, of an escalation in violence that has much to do with the persecutory metamorphosis of insecurity and anxiety and very little to do with a presumed 'clash of civilizations'.⁹⁶ Shifted to the inner Self, the victimage mechanism continues to act, hidden from view. Nonetheless, it ultimately becomes *ineffective* since it fails in its original purpose to resolve the fear and keep a check on violence. Orphaned of ritualization processes and deprived of an 'elsewhere' that permits the other's spatial and territorial exclusion, the construction of the enemy/victim generates forms of identity cohesion that are as aggressive as they are regressive, fuelled by a reciprocal persecutory projection. Far from restoring cohesion and security to a given community, the scapegoat dynamic gives rise to endogamous and reciprocally exclusive processes of building an *Us*, whose foremost and manifest effect is to form what I have defined as *immunitarian communities*:⁹⁷ whether they are the 'voluntary ghettos' and 'communities of fear' that explode cyclically in a West frightened by the siege of the other and anything but free from regressive phenomena, or ethno-religious communities entrenched around the obsession of identity and homogeneity, willing to reactivate atrocious forms of excluding the other, or lastly global communities that come together around the war/terrorism polarization.

The metamorphosis of fear in the global age therefore seems to confirm, at the emotional level, the pathological split between an *unlimited individualism* and an *endogamous communitarianism*, which originates in the implementation of defence mechanisms leading to not only the polarization of an absence and excess of *pathos*, but also, it needs to be stressed, in their substantial *inefficacy*. On one hand, the denial of fear, we have seen, pushes individuals towards forms of apathy and narcissistic entropy that prevents them from recognizing the new risks produced by global challenges. As a consequence, this produces the individuals' incapacity to perceive their unprecedented condition of spectators and potential victims at the

⁹⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*.

⁹⁵ On the contemporary forms of dehumanization, see the incisive reflection of Enrico Donaggio, *Che male c'è. Indifferenza e atrocità tra Auschwitz e i nostri giorni* (Naples: L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2005).

⁹⁶ If anything, as has been suggested, it has to do with a 'clash of emotions'; see Dominique Moïsi, "The Clash of Emotions," *Paradoxa*, no. 1 (2007): 47–52. Against the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, see the following assertions by Amartya Sen. He writes: 'The politics of global confrontation is frequently interpreted as a corollary of religious or cultural divisions in the world. [...] Underlying this line of thinking is the belief that the people of the world can be categorised [...]. A single-focus approach is a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. [...] In contrast, violence is promoted by cultivating a sense of the priority of some allegedly unique identity.' (Sen, "Freedom and Reason Offer the Solution to Cultural Confusion," *The Financial Times*, November 29, 2005).

⁹⁷ See Part I, Chap. 3, Sect. 3.4.

same time, and fuels the illusion of immunity: which means that in the name of entropic self-preservation we end up delivering the whole of humankind to the danger of self-destruction. On the other hand, the persecutory conversion of fear generates perverse and endogamous forms of alliance and solidarity, which thereby result in the reactivation of destructive communities driven by 'primordial loyalties'. This gives rise to the explosive drift of identity conflicts and to an unlimited escalation of violence at the planetary level.

Between *Self-obsession* and *Us-obsession*, as the specular polarities of the same immunitarian strategy, we run the risk of not *grasping the chance*⁹⁸ that the global age could actually be capable of offering through the very transformations that it produces and the very challenges that it contains.

On one hand, as we will see, the risks that are bearing down on humankind for the first time mean we can think of the latter as a new subject, as a set of individuals linked by their common *vulnerability* and *weakness*. Therefore, they are able to *take care* of the world in the sense of the planet, the 'loss' of which would coincide with the disappearance of the only dwelling of living beings that we know of. On the other hand, the multiplication of differences and the slide of the idea of 'other' towards the notion of 'difference', which can neither be assimilated nor expelled into an elsewhere, for the first time makes it possible to rethink the social bond as the solidaristic coexistence of a *plurality* of individuals, genders, cultures, races, religions, capable of forming a 'world', à la Arendt, since they are capable of recognizing not only the necessity but also the potential vitality of reciprocal *contamination*.

These real possibilities are, however, only a chance. Insofar as it is a chance, the subjects have the task of knowing how to grasp it. To recall a successful suggestion by André Gorz, we could say that to profit from the chance in the first place means 'to learn to discern the unrealized opportunities which lie dormant in the recesses of the present'⁹⁹; or, in a word, to lay a *wager* on the ability to build alternative scenarios and create possibilities that may not yet have been taken up but are still latent.

⁹⁸ The expression is inspired by Georges Bataille who, as already remembered above, proposes the idea of chance meant as the 'possibility of openness', see *On Nietzsche* (London: Athlone, 1992), originally published as "Sur Nietzsche," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

⁹⁹ Gorz, *Reclaiming Work*, 1.