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Humanitarian violence: how Western airmen kill and let die in order to make live

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ABSTRACT
A number of Western countries such as the United States, Britain and France have been waging war continuously since the ‘terrorist’ attacks of 11 September 2001. Although these wars have resulted in a massive loss of life, only a few scholars have tried to understand the determinants and motives behind this violence. This article aims to shed some light on this blind spot by studying the interpretive ‘frames’ (Judith Butler) that mediate the Western military’s relation to violence. It does so by relying on a qualitative inquiry with the French airmen who bombed Afghanistan (2001–2011), Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). The article argues that the classical explanation in terms of ‘de-humanization’ is only partially heuristic. Indeed, airmen sometimes see the human ‘face’ – in Levinas’ term – of the people they kill, and these moments of ‘recognition’ do not alter their will to wage war and drop bombs. I explain this apparent paradox by relying on Eyal Weizman’s notion of ‘humanitarian violence’.

Introduction
What motivates soldiers to go to war and kill? The answer to this question is pretty obvious when soldiers defend themselves or when they try to protect their comrades-in-arms (Kaufman 2009). However, such situations of ‘self-defence’ have become rare in the context of the ‘new Western way of war’ (Shaw 2006). During the last two decades, a significant proportion of Western military operations have taken the form of drone and fighter-bomber strikes against ‘terrorists’ or ‘insurgents’ who have had no material possibility of retaliation. During the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) war in Libya, for instance, NATO aircraft dropped more than 7700 bombs which killed thousands of people. Meanwhile, not a single NATO aircraft was hit during this eight-
month bombing campaign. This article aims at understanding how Western airmen make sense of what appears, from the outside, to be mere executions. Do they hate their enemies? Do they see them as remote ‘things’ with no real significance? If they acknowledge that they kill fellow human beings, how do they make sense of this?

I will address the aforementioned questions by drawing upon an inquiry into French airmen. In concrete terms, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with French pilots and navigators who participated in the wars in Afghanistan (2001–2011), Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). I have analysed the interviews from a ‘sociological’ perspective. This means that I have left to one side the psychologizing literature that argues that violence takes root in sadistic instincts or, more generally speaking, in some trans-historical ‘human nature’ (Bourke 1999). I assume, with most historians and sociologists of violence, that violence in war is like all social actions: it is not ‘natural’ but, rather, ‘naturalized’ (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2) through discourses, apparatuses (‘dispositifs’ in Foucault’s sense), and routinized practices. Judith Butler helps to conceptualize this when she argues that violence is always mediated by interpretive ‘frames’ (Butler 2004, 2010). In what follows, I will rely on this notion and investigate which ‘frames of war’ (Butler) mediate the French airmen’s lethal actions.

The notion of ‘frames of war’ also proved useful in order to develop a critical approach. The word ‘critical’ does not entail, necessarily, a normative connotation. Rather, it refers to an epistemological stance, namely the reflexive view that one cannot understand a given instance of violence by recycling the very normative assumptions which contribute towards naturalizing it. For instance, I will rely on Butler, Weizman (2012), Asad (2007), and some others in order to reject the (liberal) view that the violence perpetrated by states in accordance with the standards of international humanitarian law (IHL) would be less questionable than, say, ‘terrorist’ or ‘criminal’ violence. From a critical perspective, the notion that a certain instance of violence might be more legitimate than another constitutes, in itself, a frame of war in Butler’s sense and, therefore, an object of investigation. The reason why critical theorists tend to focus more on the violence perpetrated by Western ‘liberal’ states than so-called ‘terrorist’ violence is empirical. As pointed out by Asad, the wars that Western ‘liberal’ states have waged since 2001 ‘have already resulted in massive losses of life that immeasurably exceed anything terrorists have managed to do’ (Asad 2007, 93). For instance, the US economist Mark Herold calculated that Western fighter-bombers directly killed at least 7948 Afghan civilians between October 2001 and 2010 (Herold 2012, 49). This low estimate is more than two times higher than the number of civiians killed by the ‘terrorist’ attack of 9/11 (3380).

So far, most critical scholars have connected the question of violence to that of de-humanization. They observe, in particular, that the Western war rhetoric tends to demonize or reify the victims of Western bombs by calling them ‘terrorists’, ‘criminals’, or ‘collateral damages’. These critical scholars rely, implicitly or explicitly, on ‘theories of recognition’ (Honneth 2005; Lindemann 2010; Ricoeur 2005). They assume, to paraphrase Levinas, that violence takes root in the inability to see the other’s ‘human face’ (Levinas 2001). This argument is explicit, for instance, in the literature on the ‘virtualization’ of warfare (Der Derian 2009).

This article builds upon, but also challenges, this misrecognition paradigm. I will show that some de-humanizing dynamics are, indeed, at work in contemporary
Western warfare, and that they play a central role in the naturalization of violence. It is important to emphasize the weight of these de-humanizing dynamics in order to deconstruct the mainstream literature that presents Western combatants in general, and drone operators in particular, as genuine humanist subjects who suffer from ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD) every time they kill a fellow human being (Chamayou 2007, 156).

However, these de-humanizing tendencies are by no means the whole story. The airmen I have interviewed partly see the ‘human face’ of their victims, and these moments of recognition do not throw into question their will to wage war and drop bombs. Building upon the work of Eyal Weizman, I will argue that French airmen can be viewed as agents of a ‘humanitarian violence’ (Weizman 2012). Humanitarian violence differs from some other kinds of violence – in particular nationalist and bureaucratic violence (Arendt 1963) – in the sense that it tolerates a certain amount of identification with the victims. In contrast to nationalists, agents of humanitarian violence do not need to hate their enemies in order to feel able to kill them. Unlike bureaucrats, agents of humanitarian violence do not blind-spot the question of the moral consequences of their acts. They consider that violence is morally acceptable if it can be framed as a ‘lesser evil’. My point is that the airmen have some ‘good intersubjective reasons’, to paraphrase Boudon (1999), to believe that their lethal actions constitute a ‘lesser evil’. Indeed, they are surrounded by ‘moral technologies’ (Ophir 2002) which make this very statement.

The argument will proceed as follows. The first section of the article presents the methodological framework and the case study. The second section reviews in greater detail the aforementioned literature on the social construction of violence in current Western air wars. The other sections present the main finding of this inquiry, namely the fact that the airmen are agents of some ‘humanitarian violence’ in Eyal Weizman’s sense. I will make this point in three steps. In section three, I will mainly focus on the actors’ discourse and show that the airmen do not fully or always de-humanize their victims. In section four, I will connect these discourses to Weizman’s framework and make the point that this partial identification with their victims does not constitute much of an obstacle to violence. In section five, I will show that the frame of humanitarian violence is not a mere rhetoric. It can also be found in the concrete technologies and instruments that airmen use when they drop bombs. I will conclude with some remarks about the power structures which underpin this ‘necropolitical’ (Foucault 1997 [1976]) way of administering the life and death of populations.

**Understanding the ‘frames’ that mediate the French airmen’s relation to violence**

This article follows the methodology proposed by Sylvester, Weber, MacLeish and others: it tries to understand war and its associated power structures by focusing on those who concretely wage it, i.e. the military personnel involved (Macleish 2013, 14; Sylvester 2011, 2012; Weber 2014). This section presents the methodological and empirical framework of this research, starting with Butler’s heuristic notion of ‘frame of war’.
In spite of her philosophical background, Judith Butler has paved the way for a sociological understanding of contemporary Western war violence by putting forward a key notion: that of ‘frames of war’ (Butler 2004, 2010). This notion proved helpful in describing the arbitrary and selective character of the meaning structures which drive contemporary Western wars. Indeed, frames of war are like photographic frames. They are ‘always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version’ (Butler 2010, xi). In the case under investigation here, the frame metaphor can be taken pretty far. It helps in understanding an important characteristic of war: it draws a line between the lives one fully identifies with, the lives that remain completely outside the frame, and those which move between these two extremes. As we shall see later, non-Western civilians belong to this last category: they are seen as neither fundamentally human nor fundamentally inhuman, and this state of indeterminacy plays a central role in the naturalization of violence.

Besides, Butler’s approach helps in observing that frames of war are like all elements of what Foucault calls ‘discourse’: they take both ideational and material forms. They take ideational forms in the sense that they constitute the actors’ identities and belief systems. For instance, I will show that the frame of humanitarian violence has a strong identity dimension as it goes along with a self-representation as ‘humanist subject’ (as opposed to the ‘terrorists’ who are said to lack humane sensitivity). Yet frames of war also take material forms as they materialize in various apparatuses that both reflect and fashion human intentions. For instance, I will argue later that several new Western technologies of war can be understood as ‘moral technologies’ (Ophir 2002), i.e. as material objects which fashion the belief that one carries out a moral act when using them.

Finally, Butler’s Foucauldian approach helps in understanding that frames of war are not constituted once and for all. Like all elements of ‘discourse’, they also emerge from experience (Foucault 1997 [1976], 229). For instance, someone may go to war with few preconceived ideas about the enemy, experience the enemy’s violence, interpret it as cruelty, and start hating him in return (Barkawi 2004, 135).

Empirically, this research studies the frames of war of the French pilots and navigators who bombed Afghanistan (2001–2011), Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). Although it may appear narrow at first sight, this focus on airmen enables us to understand some more general trends of post-9/11 Western wars. Firstly, this case study illustrates an important change in Western war practices, namely the fact that Westerners often wage war and kill from a distance. The mainstream debate on this question has focused, logically, on drone operators. Indeed, drones offer a kind of ideal-typical case where people located in military bases in the West drop bombs and kill people thousands of kilometres away. It is important to note, however, that the job of an airman is not so different from that of a drone operator in the sense that they kill without exposing their own body (Gros 2006). In Afghanistan and Mali, the airmen’s ‘enemies’ only had light weapons at their disposal. In Libya, the US destroyed all Libyan fighter-jets and anti-aircraft batteries before France intervened. Besides, French rules of engagement stated that aircrew would fly at altitudes where their enemy had no chance to inflict any damage on them. 3 In each of these
three wars, this situation resulted in complete asymmetry as regards the exposure of combatants: whereas French airmen dropped thousands of bombs which probably killed hundreds if not thousands of people, not a single French aircraft was damaged during any of these operations. The interviewees highlight this fact when they point out that there is no significant difference, in terms of body exposure, between the job of a drone operator and that of a modern fighter-bomber jet pilot:

People seem to be shocked, nowadays, by the use of drones. However, is it shocking to use a fighter-bomber jet which costs several millions of dollars in order to kill a Taliban hidden in his cave with a Kalashnikov? … I do not see much of a difference between the drone which kills from a distance and what I did in Afghanistan or Libya.  

Hence, the only clear differences between drone operators and contemporary French and other Western airmen are as follows. Firstly, they have to deal with the stressful possibility of an aeronautical accident. Although the latter are more frequent at training (Dubey and Moricot 2016), an accident happened once in Afghanistan. The air crew had to eject from their aircraft, and were rescued two hours later.  

Secondly, airmen do not switch from a civilian to a military world as frequently as drone operators. More often than not, airmen go on missions overseas. Since they usually stay there several weeks, they have more time to forget civilian moral codes and adopt the military frame of reference where killing is part of the job.

I have chosen to study these three wars (Afghanistan, Libya, Mali) because they illustrate the diversity of the discourses through which Western governments have publicly justified the post-9/11 wars. During the war in Afghanistan, the main narrative was that of the ‘war on terror’. Indeed, France officially joined the United States-led coalition Enduring Freedom (and then the NATO force) in order to destroy Al Qaeda and prevent future ‘terrorist’ attacks. During the war in Libya in 2001, the trope of the ‘humanitarian war’ dominated Western war rhetoric. NATO’s military intervention was presented as a necessary means of preventing Gaddafi’s forces massacring the Libyan population. In Mali, the narrative of the ‘war on terror’ and that of the ‘humanitarian war’ were combined as ‘jihadists’ were presented as actors who would impose some inhumane interpretation of ‘sharia’ in the country whilst preparing ‘terrorist’ attacks in France.

The interviews were conducted between December 2012 and March 2013 in French military bases, i.e. a couple of years after the operations in Afghanistan, a couple of months after the war in Libya and during the French intervention in Mali. I am unaware why the French military organization agreed to open its doors. Whatever the reasons, I was introduced as a ‘CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) researcher who is conducting an independent study’. Before the interviews, I clarified that I was not commissioned by the military organization and did not intend to review their mental strengths and weaknesses. For the same reason, I also stressed the fact that the interview would be anonymized.

The interviews took the form of life stories where the interviewees were asked to talk about their personal experience of war. I structured the interviews around three main issues: how airmen make sense of the act of killing, how they perceive their enemies, and what they think about new technologies of war (in particular drones). Each
interview lasted between one and two hours. After recording them I analysed them using a qualitative interpretative approach. My goal was to ‘understand by interpretation’ – to use Weber’s famous expression – how French airmen perceive the battlefield, how they represent their enemies, and how they make sense of the practice of war. I have also tried to understand their body experience of war, i.e. what they feel when they wage war and kill (Dyvik and Greenwood 2016; Wilcox 2015).

Sociologically speaking, the group was very homogeneous. The interviewees were all men. They were all between 25 and 35 years old. Culturally speaking, nine interviewees mentioned having a religious affiliation (Christian). All the others presented themselves as atheist or agnostic. Like all fighter-bomber jet pilots or navigators, they were all officers (ranging from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel) with a strong background in mathematics and/or computer sciences. They were all proud of belonging to the corps of fighter-bomber jet pilots and navigators, a corps that is considered the most prestigious of the French air and naval forces.

Parallel to this interpretative inquiry with fighter-bomber jet pilots and navigators, I conducted 10 informative interviews with high-ranked officers of the French air and naval forces (one Air Force general, one Navy admiral, and four colonels from each force). These interviews had a different purpose: learning about the concrete aspects of current French air wars: the strategies, doctrines, rules of engagement, and technologies used by French air and naval forces. Indeed, a key assumption of this study is that the soldiers’ frames of interpretation do not float in the air. They are mediated by instruments, procedures, routinized practices, and apparatus that both carry and fashion meaning (Holmqvist 2013; Van Veeren 2014).

Every research method introduces some bias. The main potential bias of an interview-based inquiry lies in the fact that the interviewees tend to emphasize the most acceptable side of their practices. In the case under investigation here, this materialized in the fact that the airmen laid great stress on the fact that they meticulously comply with IHL. In other words, they told me nothing about their (possible) illiberal practices.

However, it is important to highlight that this possible bias also constitutes an asset. Indeed, the mainstream discourse is misleading when it suggests that IHL only constrains and limits violence. Firstly, the Western military organizations use the ambiguities of IHL in order to give extensive definitions of enemy ‘combatants’ (Allinson 2015). Secondly, IHL does not forbid the deliberate killing of ‘non-combatants’. As we shall see in detail in section five, it simply states that the killing of ‘non-combatants’ should not exceed a certain threshold (Owens 2003). In other words, the ‘liberal way of war’ is at the same time liberal and violent (Dillon and Reid 2009), and this inquiry offers a good site in order to study this particular segment of Western war violence.

In theory, frames of war have the same characteristic as the ‘interpretative frames’ studied by Goffman: they are vulnerable. Goffman speaks, in this respect, about the possibility of ‘frame breaking’ (Goffman 1974, 345). According to Butler, such situations of ‘frame breaking’ occur ‘if soldiers fail to be interpellated by the visual and narrative accounts of the wars they fight’. When this happens, Butler argues, ‘they start to lose faith in what they do, claim to be ill, go AWOL [Absent Without Official Leave], request a transfer, stop working, or simply leave’ (Butler 2010, xv). Hence, the
confrontation of Butler’s framework with the empirical study leads me to ask a primary question: Do French airmen have problems making sense of their lethal actions?

The mainstream media talk a great deal about one form of ‘frame breaking’: (alleged) cases of PTSD suffered by drone operators and Western combatants. Some scholars have echoed this discourse by explaining that drone operators and Western airmen tend to ‘over-identify’ with the people they kill so that they are unable to make sense of their lethal actions (Bourliaguet 2016; Ferrari, Tronche, and Sauvet 2013). In a recent study of French airmen, Dubey and Moricot made a similar point, although in a more nuanced way, by explaining that some airmen would also appreciate a psychological follow-up after the bombing missions (Dubey and Moricot 2008, 91; 2016).

As shown by Chamayou, the epistemological status of the discourse on the PTSD of Western combatants is unclear. Indeed, it emerged, in the first place, in the communication departments of the US Air Force and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the context of the controversy concerning the unethical character of the practice of ‘man-hunting’. According to him, the CIA and the US Air Force have fashioned this discourse in order to promote a more humane image of drone operators. Chamayou adds that one should listen more carefully to what drone operators say about their ‘stress’:

They don’t say ‘[I suffer] because we had to blow up a building’. They don’t say ‘because we saw people getting blown up’. That’s not what causes their stress – at least subjectively to them. It’s all the other quality-of-life things that everybody else would complain about too. If you look at nurses who work night shift, anybody who does shift work, they complain of the same things. (Chamayou 2013, 109)

My findings fuel Chamayou’s argument. More precisely, the airmen have a nuanced discourse on the PTSD issue. Thus, they emphasize that killing people is not a trivial act and they can imagine that some drone operators – or some fellow airmen – might suffer from it psychologically. In other words, the notion of PTSD is part of their ‘epistemic culture’ (Young 1995). They talk about it and would not be ashamed to suffer from such ‘disorders’.

However, most airmen do not suffer from PTSD themselves and when they do (one interviewee explained that he did), it has nothing to do with the question of killing. On the contrary, most pilots and navigators like going on ‘opex’ (French for ‘opérations extérieures’). It would be wrong to state that they like ‘killing’. However, it is clear that they like dropping bombs. They often compete against one another in order to obtain the ‘hottest missions’, i.e. those that allow them to drop bombs. They also throw a little party after each ‘successful mission’, i.e. each mission when the bomb hits its target.

In other words, and to return to Butler and Goffmann, the interviewees’ frames of war seem all the more solid. This primary finding is not fully surprising as we talk about professionals who are trained to drop bombs. However, it justifies in retrospect the choice of a critical approach, i.e. an approach that does not ask ‘Why do a few social actors have difficulties making sense of the violence they perpetrate?’ – but, rather, ‘What interpretive frames lead them to find it normal to kill other people?’.
The literature on the ‘de-humanizing’ tendencies of contemporary Western warfare

Several critical social scientists have investigated which discursive and interpretive ‘frames’ naturalize Western war violence. Although they stem from various intellectual traditions, most authors have emphasized the ‘de-humanizing’ tendencies of the contemporary Western war machine.

This argument is, first of all, central to the literature on Western war discourses. Thus, several authors have uncovered the ‘Eurocentric’ (Hobson 2012; Neocleous 2011) and ‘orientalist’ (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 350; Said 1979) underpinnings of discourses which present Western wars as ‘civilizing enterprises’ against the ‘Taliban’ or ‘jihadists’. They observe that this discourse builds upon the same matrix and power structure as during the colonial period. Indeed, the discourse combines gender and race prejudices in order to demonize some Orientals, reify others (represent them as ‘things’), and deprive all of them of agency. For instance, Ayotte and Husain (2005) studied the Western war discourse in Afghanistan. They showed that it relies on the exact same trope as during the colonial period, namely that of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak 1988, 280). According to Asad, this subtle war rhetoric explains the specificities of the Western way of war, in particular the ‘combination of cruelty and compassion that sophisticated social institutions enable and encourage’ (Asad 2007, 3).

Parallel to this, another set of specialists have investigated another aspect of Western war rhetoric: the representation of the West’s enemies as ‘terrorists’ or ‘criminals’. They have shown that these notions help to fashion an ‘inimicus’, in Schmitt’s term (Schmitt 1996 [1927]), i.e. a ‘moral’ or ‘absolute’ enemy (Holland 2011). As predicted by Schmitt, this moral framing of the enemy has had a significant impact on concrete war practices. It explains, firstly, the decision to designate as ‘illegal combatants’ those people who fight Western armies. It explains, secondly and consequently, how Western military organizations have given a certain legal veneer to some controversial war practices, notably torture (Richter-Montpetit 2014) and drone-led targeted killings (Chamayou 2013).

Parallel to this, another set of critical scholars have followed the path of the Frankfurt school of sociology and highlighted the ‘reifying’ tendencies of current Western war practices. Reification is a ‘colder’ de-humanizing practice than demonization. Instead of generating negative emotions, reification neutralizes the positive emotions (empathy, compassion, pity, etc.) that one may experience when confronted with the suffering of a fellow human being (Neitzel and Welzer 2013; Delori 2014; Clément, Lindemann and Sangar 2016). Since Hannah Arendt’s work on bureaucratic violence (Arendt 1963), several authors have shown how modern Western institutions have helped to undermine the ethical bounds that tie human beings to one another (Cohn 1987; Honneth 2007; Lindemann 2010; Wasinski 2010).

The argument made by advocates of this approach is that reification has reached a new threshold in the ‘new Western way of war’ (Shaw 2006). The key insight is that these new technologies of war – in particular computers and guidance systems – add another series of technological ‘layers’ which further undermine the recognition of the other as an alter ego. Following this line of thought, new Western technologies of war
redefine the normalized ‘ontologies’ of the human (Holmqvist 2013), shaping an economic framing of war (Gros 2006, 223; Shaw 2006), and, most of all, erasing the boundary between reality and fiction (Der Derian 2009; Kaplan 2015). This last argument is central in the literature on the ‘play-station’ mentality of drone operators. Thus, one could fill an entire bookshelf with books or articles which make the point that the victim of drone strikes is ‘reduced to an anonymous simulacrum that flickers across the screen’ (Pugliese 2011, 943) or that drone operators are ‘morally disengaged from [their] destructive and lethal actions’ (Royakkers and van Est 2010, 289).

Although by no means exhaustive, this review of the literature helps to show that most critical scholars have emphasized the de-humanizing tendencies of contemporary Western wars. To a certain extent, one may say that the figure of Eichmann haunts this critical scholarship. Like Arendt’s archetypical character, Western combatants are said to be unable to see the ‘human face’ of the people they kill. As we shall see in the next section, the data only partially resonate with this theoretical expectation.

**Airmen do not fully de-humanize the people they bomb**

The aforementioned critical scholars have a point when they emphasize the de-humanizing tendencies of the new Western way of war. In the case under investigation here, this logic emerges, for instance, when the interviewees call ‘terrorists’, ‘the Taliban’ or ‘jihadists’ their enemies. They use these words in exactly the same way as government leaders and the mainstream media, i.e. in a highly ‘orientalist’ (Said 1979) fashion. For instance, the word ‘terrorist’ does not refer to the positivist definition of terrorism as a ‘political or war method consisting of targeting civilians in order to generate emotions such as terror, fear or demoralization’ (Chaliand 2008, 21). Nor do the words ‘Taliban’ or ‘jihadist’ refer to their actual referent in Pashto and Arabic (respectively, ‘student of religion’ and actor in a ‘holy struggle’ or ‘holy war’). One could replace these words by the phrase ‘(oriental) bad guys’ without much semantic loss. This framing is likely to have some impact on violence. This is, at least, what the following statements suggest:

> I have no pity for the people we fight. They have no pity for us anyway. If we do not kill them, they will kill us. When you see what they can do... They are able to kill kids, to cut throats in front of a camera and post it on the Internet.⁶

Besides, the airmen often reify the people they kill. This is the case, for instance, when they use ‘technostrategic’ (Cohn 1987) expressions such as ‘dealing with an objective’ (‘traiter un objectif’) or ‘delivering a weapon’ (‘délivrer un armement’) when talking about a targeted killing operation. It is also the case when they describe the civilian victims of the bombs they drop as ‘collateral damage’ or ‘human shields’. As pointed out by Butler, this last expression – ‘human shield’ – is probably the most reifying one as

> we are asked to believe that those children [or women or men] are not really children, are not really alive, that they have already been turned to metal, to steel, that they belong to the machinery of bombardment, at which point the body of the child is conceived as nothing more than a militarized metal that protects the attacker against attack. (Butler 2010, xxvii)
However, it is important to state that these de-humanizing tendencies are not the alpha and the omega of the airmen’s approach to violence, and this for three reasons. Firstly, they do not always de-humanize their victims. New information and communication technologies play an important role in this respect. During the bombing missions, the new technologies of war contribute heavily towards the reification of the battlefield (see above). However, this is only a short sequence in an airman’s life. During the debriefings following missions, for instance, the airmen see on large, realistic screens the ‘highlights’ of their mission recorded by drones and satellites. At this stage, they see guys who run out of their vehicles and then, we see them pushed to the ground by the flow. Sometimes, we see that what appeared as little points during the mission are, in fact, guys who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong moment.7

In other words, the very same technologies which de-humanize the battlefield can also reduce this distancing in other circumstances.

This representation of the human consequences of the bombings may become even stronger when airmen return home. Indeed, they sometimes go on the Internet and watch the videos posted by the Afghan, Libyan or Malian people who witnessed the scene. Sometimes they also read the reports of critical Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which contradict the official narrative. When this happens, they are confronted with a completely different framing of the bombing missions. These new media teach airmen that being a ‘terrorists’, a ‘jihadist’ or ‘collateral damage’ is not a full-time job: ‘you learn that the guy has a family, a personal story…’.8

Secondly, airmen show some reflexivity concerning the de-humanizing power of Western war rhetoric and military language. This is the case, typically, when they explain that the notion of ‘war on terror’ does not make any sense as ‘terrorism’ is a method’, or when they highlight that they do ‘not like the expression “collateral damage”’. I also had an interesting conversation with an airman about ‘techno-strategic language’. The pilot was aware of the fact that this language distorts reality in the sense that it ‘euphemizes violence’ and ‘hides the human and concrete consequences of the bombings’.

Finally, they claim some agency over their lethal actions. In this respect, they are the exact opposite of ‘Eichmann the bureaucrat’ (the ideal-typical character pictured by Arendt). They point out that their bombs kill and, moreover, that this is not trivial. One metaphor recurred in many interviews: ‘passing through a door’ (‘franchir une porte’). An airman also explained, in slightly different words, that there is a before and an after. I do not smile about it. I do not congratulate myself for having killed people. I would be lying to you if I said that it stops me sleeping. However, there is a before and an after.11

All this illustrates that, at the level of discourse at least, de-humanization is not total. Dehumanization is present in the sense that airmen do not grant the same value to all lives. Typically, ‘collateral damages’ appear much less ‘human’ than the people they fully identify with: the ‘comrades-in-arms’ of the army, the Western victims of ‘terrorist’ attacks, etc. However, (de)humanization is not binary as in the ‘classical’ misrecognition paradigm. It is, rather, a matter of degree.
This translates into a specific articulation of war emotions where selective compassion matters more than hatred or indifference. One Tocquevillian character illustrates this particular emotional relation to ‘suffering others’: Madame de Sévigné. According to Tocqueville, Madame de Sévigné is the ideal-typical example of the ‘gentle aristocrat’. She hates nobody. Nor is she indifferent to the fate of anybody. However, she is unable to experience compassion or ‘pity’ in a ‘democratic way’, i.e. by assuming that all human beings have the same value:

It would be a mistake to believe that Madame de Sévigné . . . was a selfish or cruel person. She was passionately attached to her children, and very ready to sympathize in the sorrows of her friends. But Madame de Sévigné had no clear notion of suffering in anyone who was not a nobleman. (Tocqueville 1980 [1835], 105)

Like Madame de Sévigné, the airmen mean no harm to the people who do not belong to their community, i.e. the victims of the bombs they drop. In particular, they are not indifferent to the fate of civilians (the so-called ‘collateral damages’). They know that they do some evil when killing them, and they know that their bombs regularly kill civilians. However, they consent to do it. I explain why in the next section by elaborating on Weizman’s notion of ‘humanitarian violence’.

The principle of the ‘lesser evil’

Weizman coined the term ‘humanitarian violence’ in order to describe what appears to him the main rationale underpinning contemporary Western warfare. This notion resonates, to a certain extent, with Asad’s notion of ‘liberal violence’ (Asad 2007) and Dillon and Reid’s concept of the ‘liberal way of war’ (Dillon and Reid 2009). Indeed, all these authors share the view that humanitarian thinking and political liberalism do not constitute a solution to the problem of violence but, rather, constitute a particular way of articulating it. In the interests of conciseness, I will mainly rely on Weizman in order to present the main characteristics of this original frame of war.

The central characteristic of this frame lies in its approach to the moral question of good and evil. Weizman calls this approach ‘the principle of the lesser evil’. He defines this rationale as follows:

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

In other words, the principle of the lesser evil is a knowledge regime which rejects the Manichean view that actions are either good or evil (a frame that would forbid dropping a bomb every time that the bomb risks killing innocent people). The principle of the lesser evil paves the way for a moral justification of violence where violence appears legitimate if it enables avoidance of a ‘greater evil’.

The principle of the lesser evil emerges in the interviews when the pilots are invited to comment on the occasions when they kill civilians. More often than not, they explain that if the number of collateral damage – sorry, I do not like this word – if the number of civilian casualties is below the number of people I save, it is right to shoot. I know that this
is not always easy to hear. Yet reason has to be opposed to emotion. I wish I had other ways of neutralizing them. Believe me. But I don’t.\textsuperscript{12}

Now, an outside observer would probably object that these remarks are to some extent misleading. Airmen cannot know, precisely, the number of people that they save when they drop a bomb. The only thing that they can be sure of is that they kill people. Thus, the quote might be interpreted as another illustration of a mechanism observed by Arendt a couple of decades ago, namely that ‘those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil’ (Arendt 1994 [1954], 271; see also Weizman 2012, 27). However, sociologists are used to saying that ‘a false idea is a true fact’. In other words, this article does not aim to assess the factual accuracy of the actors’ statements but rather what these statements tell us about their approach to violence, i.e. their frames of war.

One particular action plays a central role in the social construction of the frame where killing appears as a necessary means to ‘make live’ (Dillon and Reid 2009): ‘air support’ missions, i.e. these missions where airmen drop bombs in order to save comrades-in-arms who are caught under enemy fire. These missions are all the more important because the comrades-in-arms lie at the very centre of the airmen’s ‘economy of pity’. When they provide ‘air support’ to French or Western combatants who are caught under enemy fire, airmen have a clear and sensitive perception of their moral contribution to the good of humanity. These missions may involve killing more ‘innocent people’ than the actual number of Western combatants caught under enemy fire. However, this does not throw into question their self-representation as moral agents because these characters – ‘comrades in arms’ and ‘collateral damage’ – lie at the extremities of their ‘economy of pity’. They are all deemed ‘human’ in an abstract way, yet they are not ‘equally human’. In Asad’s terms, they have ‘differential exchange value in the marketplace of death’ (Asad 2007, 94). Whereas ‘comrades in arms’ have to be defended at all cost, the killing of ‘collateral damages’ can be framed as a tolerable sin that allows the avoidance of a greater evil.

The fact that airmen frame their violence in such moral terms has an impact on their self-representation. They do not represent themselves as people who kill. Rather, they represent themselves as people who ‘save lives’. Thus, seven interviewees compared their work, spontaneously, to the work of firemen or first-aid doctors. The others also insisted that they save lives:

I kill terrorists. I do not target civilians. The guys we killed in Mali and Libya were no gentlemen farmers. They were planning terrorist attacks. When I kill somebody who plans to leave a bomb in the subway in Paris, I save lives. When I destroy a missile battery which bombs a market in the middle of Benghazi, I save Libyan lives.\textsuperscript{13}

Like all frames of war, this one fashions a highly specific representation of reality (Butler 2010, xi). For instance, it seems dubious that the relatives of the ‘collateral damage’ perceive French pilots as people who ‘save lives’. However, the sociological paradigm of the ‘false ideas’ that constitute ‘true facts’ still applies. In this case, the true fact is that airmen conceive of themselves as ‘humanitarian’ agents, and that this self-representation impacts, positively, on their will to drop bombs. One may point out that this self-representation not only naturalizes the very act of pulling on the trigger. It also helps to resolve the ‘cognitive dissonances’ (Festinger 1957) which arise, in the long
term, when the airmen see the negative consequences of the ‘opérations extérieures’ in which they participate.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the interviews took place in 2012 and 2013, i.e. at a time when it was hard to make the case that Western wars in Afghanistan and Libya had had many positive effects for the fight against ‘terrorists’ or for local populations. In the case of Libya, for instance, the militias armed by Western powers had started fighting each other in what appeared, more and more, to be a continuation and escalation of the Libyan civil war. Besides, it was impossible to make the case that this military intervention had been of much positive consequence for the ‘global war on terrorism’. Indeed, tons of weapons delivered by France and the Western powers to anti-Gaddafi groups had made their way through the Sahel and fallen into the hands of ‘terrorist’ groups, including the very ‘terrorist groups’ that several airmen bombed in Mali.

The interviewees seemed aware of all these problems. However, they considered that these problematic elements did not throw into question the (moral) sense of their action:

> When I see the situation in Libya now, it is not brilliant. When I see Afghanistan…. Yet this does not invalidate the fact that we did a good job. The people we saved there can have a life now. It is not brilliant. But they are alive.\(^\text{14}\)

In other words, a belief in the humanitarian performance of the bombings immunizes their paradigm vis-à-vis possible questions concerning the political utility of France’s grand strategy. This way of dealing with cognitive dissonances is similar to what Philippe Bezes says about the French senior officials responsible for evaluating the impact of state reforms in France: when they see that reforms have negative concrete consequences, they blind-spot the latter, opt for a moral framing, and ‘radicalize their ethics of conviction’ (Bezes 2000, 328).

Now, one may justly object that the elements presented above reflect the actors’ discourse and say nothing, or little, about their real motives. This objection is a fair one and to be honest it is impossible to dismiss it completely. The reason for this is epistemological: interpretive sciences cannot prove that their interpretations are valid in the same way as ‘positive sciences’ do (Popper and Miller 1983) or claim to do (Dryzek 1993). They can only put forward elements which support their interpretations and discuss these with co-interpreters (other scientists and readers; Bevir 2010). In the next and final section, I offer an argument that fuels my interpretation: most of the premises, rationales, and conclusions of the frame of ‘humanitarian violence’ are not only present in the discourse of these actors, but can also be found in the concrete ‘apparatuses’ that they use. I shall illustrate this by presenting in more detail one central ‘apparatus’ of the ‘new’ Western way of war: rules of engagement.

### A ‘moral technology’: ‘rules of engagement’

The sociology of science and technology has long established that instruments and technologies are not neutral. As social artefacts, they carry the meaning(s) that their inventors put into them and impact on how their users frame the world. The notion of ‘moral technology’ (Ophir 2002) stems from this set of observations concerning the
‘discursive’ dimension of instruments and technologies. It posits that technologies are not necessarily ‘technical’. They can also be framed as ‘moral’, as ‘the term applies to a regime of enunciation, or, to put it another way, to a mode of existence, a particular form of the exploration of being – in the midst of many others’ (Latour and Venn 2002, 248).

One ‘moral technology’ plays a central role in contemporary Western wars: ‘rules of engagement’. These rules take the form of (written) texts which state the circumstances under which the soldiers/airmen are authorized to open fire. Their claim to ‘morality’ stems from the fact that they present themselves as invitations to ‘master’ violence. Concretely, they refer to the key principles of IHL – the ‘discrimination’ and ‘proportionality’ principles – and explain how these principles can be understood in practice. Thus, they state how airmen should distinguish between ‘combatants’ and ‘non-combatants’. They also provide a concrete and operational translation of the ‘proportionality’ principle by stating how many ‘non-combatants’ airmen are allowed to kill – or put at risk – in order to destroy a given military objective. They do so by stating a number that plays a tremendous role in contemporary Western wars: the ‘non-combatant casualty cut-off value’ (NCCV). An NCCV of 0 means that the airmen should put no ‘non-combatant’ at risk. An NCCV of 30 means that they are allowed to open fire if they estimate that they will not kill more than 30 civilians.

The interviewees were not authorized to tell me the NCCV used in Afghanistan, Libya, and Mali. However, they explained how it works. NCCV depends, concretely, on three factors. It depends, firstly, on a subjective and arbitrary assessment of the ‘value’ of civilians. In this respect, the most important variable is geographical or/and racial. When a ‘terrorist’ attack occurs on the territory of a Western state, the NCCV used by police and military forces is close to zero, meaning that they do not want to put at risk any French or Western civilian. When they operate in the non-Western world, however, the NCCV rises significantly. This is why Western forces use different instruments when they operate on Western territory or outside the West: elite commandos on the ground in the former case, armed drones and fighter-bomber jets in the latter.15

Secondly, the NCCV depends on a contextual assessment of the value of Western military lives. When Western powers consent to expose their troops to the enemy’s retaliation, they reduce the NCCV and send in troops on the ground. When they want to spare the lives of the Western military personnel, they raise the NCCV and opt for air power. As noted by Shaw, this choice implies a ‘transfer of risks’ to non-Western civilians (Shaw 2006).

Thirdly, the NCCV depends on a subjective and arbitrary assessment of the value of the military target. During the US war in Iraq, for instance, US rules of engagement stated that the NCCV was 30 for each ‘high-value military target’. This meant, in practice, that pilots were allowed to kill up to 29 civilians in order to eliminate a high-ranking member of ‘Al Qaida’ or a senior official of Saddam Hussein’s regime. When the target is a mere ‘jihadi’, the NCCV falls significantly. This means, in practice, that the value of human lives is relational. The framing of a person as a ‘high-value military target’ means that the people situated nearby can be killed or, at least, put at risk. In Asad’s terms, their ‘exchange rate’ breaks down (Asad 2007, 94).
Of course, it is impossible to calculate precisely the number of non-combatant casualties that a bomb will make. There are too many uncertainties: Is this the right target? Will the bomb really hit it? Is this moving figure a child or a dog? etc. However, these uncertainties disappear when the ‘moral technologies’ associated with rules of engagement come to the fore. Since the air war in Kosovo in 1999, most NATO aircraft are equipped with a program called ‘FAST-CD’ (Fast Assessment Strike Tool-Collateral Damage). The software helps to estimate the ‘collateral damage’ and checks whether it is above the NCCV stated by the rules. As explained by Pomarède, it does so by representing the targeted area through concentric circles centred on the impact point. A number is assigned to each concentric circle. It states the probability, for each person located in the concentric circle, of being killed when the bomb explodes. At the impact point, the probability is generally 100%. At the extremity of the concentric circles, it falls to a few percent (Pomarede 2014).

This kind of new technology helps to transform incalculable uncertainty into calculated risk. Weizman notes, in this respect, that the agents of ‘humanitarian violence’ are ‘like the finance specialists who acknowledge the impossibility of prediction but do little else than calculate’. They are ‘incessantly weighing their options and hedging their risks under the assumption of unpredictability and uncertainty. Hence, it is the very act of calculation – the very fact that calculation took place – that justifies their action’ (Weizman 2012, 12).

These ‘moral technologies’ contribute towards fashioning beliefs in the ‘humanitarian’ character of violence. For instance, the fact that airmen do not ‘target’ civilians helps to fashion the belief that they are not ‘terrorists’ or ‘criminals’. Besides, the fact that the NCCV sometimes equates to zero helps to fashion the belief that the violence is fully ‘humanitarian’, i.e. that it only saves lives. When the NCCV is above zero, the airmen learn the specific ‘economy of pity’ which I presented above. They learn that all lives count, but that some count more than others. Hence, it appears rational – and even moral – to kill or let die some people in order to save others.

Conclusion

This article aimed to understand the interpretive frames which naturalize current Western war violence by focusing on what appeared to be a revealing case study: those French pilots and navigators who bombed Afghanistan, Libya, and Mali. I have shown that critical theorists have a point when they argue that a number of de-humanizing dynamics operate. However, I have also argued that this well-known motor of violence does not account for the whole phenomenon. Indeed, the inquiry revealed that the airmen do not completely de-humanize the people they kill, at least not the people that they call ‘non-combatants’. More precisely, these de-humanizing dynamics are part of a greater framing whose key characteristic consists of: (1) claiming the positive value of all human lives (including the ‘non-combatants’ killed by Western airmen), (2) granting little (positive) value to the lives of non-Western ‘non-combatants’, and (3) administrating death in accordance with the lesser evil principle. I have shown, moreover, that the airmen have some good intersubjective reasons to conceive of themselves as agents of this ‘humanitarian violence’: they are surrounded by apparatuses which make this very statement. ‘Rules of engagement’, in
particular, solidify their self-representation as moderators of violence whilst fashioning the belief that dropping a bomb may constitute a lesser evil.

These findings invite us to draw some more general conclusions about the power structures which underpin this particular frame of war. In the case under investigation here, one important power move consists of disconnecting the assessment of violence ('moderate' vs. 'total' or 'humanitarian' vs. 'barbaric') from the actual death toll. Indeed, dozens of NGOs, United Nations (UN) reports and critical press articles have established that Western air wars kill far more civilians than 'terrorists' or 'criminals' (Wagner 2013). Airmen know these numbers. However, the frame of humanitarian violence resolves this contradiction by positing that the way of killing matters more than the actual death toll.

My last remark concerns the characterization of this knowledge/power nexus. Obviously, it has all the characteristics of what Foucault called 'necropolitical power'. As Allinson puts it, ‘necropolitics refers to the arrogation of, in Foucauldian terms, the sovereign’s command of death, but within the apparatuses of surveillance, auditing, and management which characterize ‘biopower’ (Allinson 2015, 114). Concretely, airmen administer death in the same way as biopoliticians administer the ‘life’ of populations (Foucault 1997 [1976], 214). They calculate, compare one number with another, weigh options and choose between relative values. As Weizman puts it: ‘increasing the harm to civilians can then be undertaken and monitored using the same tools conceived to reduce it’ (Weizman 2012, 19). This reminds us that the frame of humanitarian violence is not restricted to the military. It is, rather, a component of our ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin 2010).

Notes

1. I distance myself in this article from those notions that carry the voice of particular social actors, notably the airmen that I have interviewed. The word 'terrorist' always falls into this category. This is why I surround it with inverted commas.
4. Interview no. 3 with an airman, December 2012.
5. The aircrew who conducted the first French strikes in Libya took off from France and refuelled up in the air on their way to Libya.
6. Interview no. 16 with an airman, March 2013.
8. Interview no. 32 with an airman, March 2013.
10. Interview no. 29 with an airman, March 2013.
11. Interview no. 3 with an airman, December 2012.
12. Interview no. 3 with an airman, December 2012.
13. Interview no. 3 with an airman, December 2012.
15. It is important to stress, in this respect, that the choice between these two security instruments does not result from technical considerations. As the assassination of Bin Laden illustrates, Western governments do not hesitate to send elite troops on the ground when they deem this necessary.
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