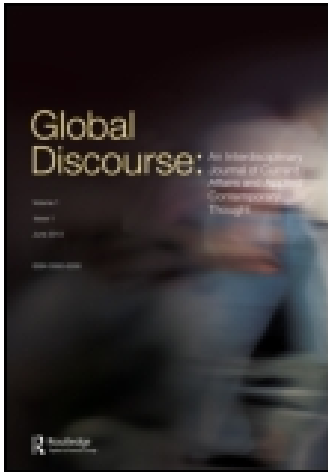


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Mathias Delori<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Sciences Po Bordeaux, Centre Emile Durkheim, Bordeaux, France

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Killing without hatred: the politics of (non)-recognition in contemporary Western wars

Mathias Delori\*

*Sciences Po Bordeaux, Centre Emile Durkheim, Bordeaux, France*

As pointed out by military historian Joanna Bourke, ‘the characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing’. This simple observation has led to some important literature on how soldiers relate to the suffering and deaths they cause. This literature has shown that military consent for killing does not have its origins in a pre-discursive biological nature. Rather, it is mediated by powerful meaning structures – such as nationalist narratives or demonized representations of the enemy – that state which lives should be recognized as livable, and which lives should remain excluded from this economy of compassion. This article investigates how military consent for killing is constructed in the context of contemporary Western wars. It does so by focusing on a particular case study: those French soldiers who participated in the war in Libya in 2011. The analysis – based on 40 semi-structured interviews with military leaders and fighter aircraft pilots – reveals a framing of war where enemies are neither framed as an object of hatred nor of ritual sacrifice nor as anything else. They are ‘ungrievable lives’ as expressed by Judith Butler: ‘they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed’. The article reviews the ideas and materialities that lead to this spectacular case of misrecognition.

**Keywords:** critical war studies; consent for killing; discursive approach; biopolitique

## Introduction

Killing other people is not a trivial activity. It is forbidden by most moral and legal codes, and it is something most people do not do in their everyday life. Yet this general observation admits of one notable exception – soldiers – whose job or duty implies that they may infringe this moral command (Bourke 1999). Consequently, a literature has emerged that tries to understand how consent for killing is constructed. This literature has showed that it does not have its origins – contrary to what Freud assumed (Freud and Einstein 1932) – in a biological, trans-historical or pre-discursive ‘human nature’. Rather, it is a social construct whose content has to be studied historically. This article addresses the question of the social construction of the military’s consent for killing in the context of contemporary humanitarian and technological wars, i.e., those wars which do not rely explicitly on the ‘logic of self-defense’ (Kaufman 2009). It is based on a sociological enquiry focusing on those French aircraft pilots who waged the war in Libya in 2011. The article tries to understand how they make sense of the act of killing, how they relate to the suffering they cause, and what this tells us about how war is waged in concrete terms.

The literature on this issue appears strongly divided. On the one hand, mainstream scholars argue that the trend is towards greater respect for the enemy and greater control

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\*Email: [m.delori@sciencespobordeaux.fr](mailto:m.delori@sciencespobordeaux.fr)

of violence. They point out, to begin with, that the biological racism, which contributed to shaping the ‘culture of violence’ (Audouin-Rouzeau 2002; Mosse 2000) of the two World Wars, has disappeared or, at least, receded. Besides, they argue that *jus in bello* – the law which regulates the conduct of war – has become more constraining in the context of ‘humanitarian’ wars, and that Western military organizations spend heavily in order to equip their personnel with precision weapons.

On the other hand, critical war studies have deconstructed this optimistic interpretation. In the first place, post-colonial studies have provided ample evidence of the discursive continuity between colonial wars and present-day ones. They have shown, in particular, that the ‘cultural racism’ (Hobson 2007) which gave meaning to colonization – the ‘civilized/non-civilized’ dichotomy – plays a central role in present-day Western wars. Parallel to this, other critical authors have argued that one does not need to frame the enemy as biologically or culturally inferior in order to feel able to kill him (Mariot 2003/2004). Dehumanization is sufficient and it is perfectly achieved – so the argument goes – by modern technologies of war, which construct a ‘reified’ (Honneth 2007) representation of the enemy.

In this politically- and normatively charged context, it seems advantageous to adopt an empirical approach. I will do so by focusing on one particular case: the war waged by NATO forces in Libya in 2011. This case is interesting because it displays two dynamics which are central to the contemporary Western way of war: the framing of war as humanitarian on the one hand and the use of new technologies on the other. As regards the first dynamic, NATO forces officially intervened in order to check the massacre of civilian populations, which President Gadhafi was said to be committing. To do so, the NATO made extensive use of guided missiles, drones, and high-tech fighter jets. This use of new technologies had the result that NATO forces could kill without exposing themselves to their enemy’s retaliation. Indeed, while the number of people killed by NATO remains unknown (as we shall see in the fourth section of this article), we know that not a single Western soldier died during this seven-month military operation.<sup>1</sup>

The argument put forward in this article owes a great deal to the aforementioned critical approach to war and, more precisely, to Judith Butler’s comments concerning the ‘ungrievability’ of certain lives (Butler 2004, 2009, 2010). My point is that the two modern dynamics – the framing of war as humanitarian and the use of new technologies – help to construct a framing of war that completely erases the face of the enemy, whatever adjective one wants to put before the word ‘face’ (humane, animalized, totemic, etc.). My research has found, more precisely, that the victims of violence by a Western state are not framed as an object of hatred, or of ritual sacrifice, or of military strategy, or as anything else. They are ‘ungrievable lives’ in the sense that ‘they cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed’ (Butler 2010, xix). This article reviews the ideas (discourses, images, narratives, etc.) and materialities (procedures, routinized actions, etc.) that shape this spectacular case of misrecognition.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I will introduce the literature on contemporary Western wars, in particular liberal and critical studies. In the second section, I present my empirical framework. This is based on two primary sources: an ethnographic study of three French Air Force bases and 40 semi-structured interviews with French soldiers who took part in the war in Libya. I elaborate on my theoretical framework and argument in the third and fourth sections.

### Review of the literature: liberal and critical approaches to contemporary Western wars

All students of war agree with the notion that Western warfare has gone through important changes since the end of the Cold War. The most obvious developments are the rise of new discourses on war (such as the discourses on the ‘war on terror’ and ‘humanitarian war’), the professionalization of military organizations, and the use of new technologies that facilitate killing from a distance. Unsurprisingly, specialists in the field disagree when assessing how these trends affect the social construction of consent for killing and the manner of waging war. In the following paragraphs, I will review the two opposite perspectives on this issue: the liberal and the critical.

To begin with, several authors have developed a sympathetic view of present-day Western wars. They have argued that the trend is towards a more human representation of the enemy, and therefore a greater control of violence. They have put forward several arguments in order to fuel this interpretation. Most of these arguments are inspired by the liberal theory of international relations (Battistella 2008).

These authors point out, firstly, that racist depictions of the enemy do not enjoy the centrality they used to have (Audouin-Rouzeau 2008). Admittedly, those politicians willing to sell their war to the public opinion still represent the Other in a negative way. Think, for instance, of the representation of the Taliban put forward by the Bush administration before invading Afghanistan in 2001–2002 (Holland 2011) or, more generally, about the frightening and Orientalist (Said 1979) image of the ‘Islamic terrorist’ mobilized in the so-called ‘war on terror’. Yet this kind of discourse is said to have little influence on soldiers themselves, and therefore on the practice of war. According to Le Corvisier, the reason for this lies in the fact that modern Western military organizations have learned throughout history that war is better waged ‘when soldiers kill without passion, in order to win’ (Corvisier 1975, 5). Since then, so the argument goes, they have spent much energy on teaching norms and values that prescribe respect for the enemy. Although this trend is scarcely a new one, it is said to have become more important with the professionalization of military organizations.

Secondly, proponents of this approach argue that *jus in bello* – the law which regulates the conduct of war – has become more effective since the end of the Cold War. Thus, Vennesson has made the point that international law has become a key component of Western military cultures and military doctrines (Vennesson et al. 2008). When this is not the case, public opinion in Western countries is said to have developed such a degree of sensitivity about the human consequences of Western state violence that military organizations are obliged to take this normative development into account (Hurrell 2002). The institutionalization of such ‘international regimes’ has been documented in fields as different as landmines and chemical weapons (Price 1998; Finnemore 1999).

Finally, these authors point out that the actual nature of warfare reinforces this dynamic. They argue that ‘rules of engagement’ regulate the use of force, thus, rendering completely outdated the prospect of ‘total war’ (Colonomos 2008). Besides, they observe that Western military organizations spend a lot of money on equipping their personnel with precision weapons such as GPS and laser-guided bombs. Hence, the argument states that the actual instruments of war make it possible to meet the dictates of contemporary moral norms and strategy, namely greater respect for the enemy and greater control over violence (Pinker 2011; Vennesson et al. 2008). All these developments are said to materialize in a ‘fact’: a decrease in the overall number of people killed during warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this optimistic view has been challenged by scholars who take a more critical and reflective perspective (Brincat, Lima, and Nunes 2012; Aradau 2012; Roach

2007; Edkins and Nick 2009). Critical war and security studies do not constitute a perfectly unified paradigm. They cover research fields as different as gender studies (Enloe 2004; Blanchard 2003; Tickner and Sjoberg 2011), post-colonial studies (Amos and Parmar 2005; hooks 1995), post-structuralist approaches (Edkins 1999), etc. In spite of these differences, the proponents of these approaches share a common distrust vis-à-vis the liberals' positivist claims to produce value-free scholarship (Tickner 2005). They argue that the proponents of the liberal approach to IR condemn themselves to a certain short-sightedness when they choose to study an object – the violence of liberal states – by using 'liberal' categories of analysis. Instead, they take political liberalism as an object of investigation and try to understand how it generates its own violence (Geis and Brock 2006).

As often happens, the most frontal critique of the liberal approach has been put forward by postcolonial theorists. They have pointed out that the discourse on 'humanitarian war' is scarcely new. It has its roots in the West's neo-colonial self-representation as a 'humanity's soldier' (Chuter 1996), and the narrative of the 'civilizing mission' (Hobson 2007, 105). In some cases, such as the US war in Afghanistan of 2001–2002, the discursive continuity with colonial wars materialized in a number of precise meaning structures and symbols. Thus, Ayotte and Husain have conducted a study of the discourse, which preceded the US war in Afghanistan in 2001–2002. They found that this discourse relied on Orientalist images and narratives – like that which frame Afghan women as 'gendered slaves in need of "saving" by the West' (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 113) – which exactly echo the British and French colonial discourses of the nineteenth century.

Given the numerous discursive continuities between those wars and contemporary Western warfare, it is tempting to hypothesize that this colonial way of war – the mix of cruelty and paternalism described by Fanon (2002 [1961]) – has not completely vanished. Several empirical elements support this interpretation. For instance, current Western counter-insurgency doctrines explicitly draw upon precedents and action principles that originated in colonial wars (Olsson 2008). Besides, the disproportion between the number of victims on each side of contemporary Western wars – an approximate ratio of 1/50 according to Chaliand – recalls those colonial wars when the technological superiority of Western armies led to a complete asymmetry in the exposure of combatants to the risk of death or injury (Chaliand 2008, 62). Finally, the rare independent testimonies on actual Western warfare suggest that the 'cruelty' (Asad 2007, 94) which drove colonial wars is not over. Taking the examples of the Western and Israeli wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza and Lebanon, Asad points out that 'Western states (including Israel) have massacred thousands of civilians and imprisoned large numbers without trial; they have abducted, tortured, and assassinated people they claim are militants and laid waste to entire countries' (Asad 2007, 93).

The main argument put forward by proponents of this post-colonial reading of Western wars is that this culture of violence is neither a throwback to some pre-modern or pre-liberal time, nor a response to violence coming from outside (as liberals suggest). Rather, it 'is integral to liberalism as a political formation' (Asad 2007, 3). The reason for this lies, firstly, in the 'cultural racism' (Hobson 2007) which the 'civilized/non-civilized' and the 'liberal/non-liberal' dichotomies carry. As Butler puts it, this claim to wage war on behalf of humanity 'reveals its own barbarism (...) as it "justifies" its own violence by presuming the barbaric sub-humanity of the other against whom that violence is waged' (Butler 2010). According to Asad, this logic is central to the social construction of present-day consent for killing: 'the right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways toward other people – especially toward citizens of foreign states at war and toward the uncivilized, whose very existence is a threat to civilized order' (Asad 2007, 59).

Parallel to this, other critical scholars have put forward another argument concerning the misrecognition (Honneth 2007) that accompanies the use of violence in warfare today. This ‘critical sociological approach’ puts greater emphasis on the discourses and technologies associated with modernity (Mavelli 2013; Pin-Fat 2013; Seth 2013). Besides, it points out that the cultural racism accurately described by postcolonial approaches is not the only motor of the present-day consent for killing. In some cases, modern subjects kill without hatred, simply because they fail to represent and ‘recognize’ Alter as an Alter-Ego (Honneth 2005; Lebow 2008; Lindemann 2010).

This logic of misrecognition emerges, in particular, from the rationalization of the conduct of war, and the reifying dynamics that this process generates. The notion of ‘rationalization’ is understood, here, in the most classical (Weberian) sense of the term. It refers to a century-old process which includes the bureaucratization of military organizations (Bartov 1998; Arendt 1963), the development of strategy (Wasinski 2010), and the rise of technically complex instruments of war such as artillery, aviation, and more recently, computers. Critical sociologists of war argue that these *dispositifs* (in Foucault’s term) introduce a greater physical and mental distance between combatants, and therefore annihilate the positive emotions (compassion, pity or sympathy, etc.) engendered by the recognition of the Other as an Alter-ego (Arendt 1963). Consequently, they erase the moral and human dimensions of war, as the world saw during the first half of the European twentieth century.

This critical approach is interesting for the subject under investigation here because the rationalization of war seems to have reached a new threshold in the context of contemporary Western wars. Indeed, the new technologies of war – drones, computers, etc. – add another series of ‘layers’ (Latour and Venn 2002, 251) to this process of dehumanization. By doing so, these new technologies construct a framing of war that further euphemizes violence and creates a reified image of the enemy. They do so by increasing the distance between combatants (Dubey and Moricot 2008), erasing the border between reality and fiction (Der Derian 2009; Herman and Peterson 2012), and shaping – in the case of drone operators – a ‘play-station’ mentality (Chamayou 2013, 153).

As we can see, the literature on modern warfare does not offer any clear answer to the questions raised in the introduction: how do soldiers make sense of the act of killing? How do they relate to the suffering they cause? And what does this tell us about how war is actually waged? While mainstream scholarship argues that a ‘civilizing process’ is at stake which leads to a greater control of violence,<sup>3</sup> this view has been strongly criticized by those authors who take a more critical and reflective approach. On the one hand, students of post-coloniality have made the point that liberal discourse carries a ‘cultural racism’, which materializes in a neo-colonial manner of waging war. On the other hand, critical sociologists have argued that this logic is not central to the modern economy of violence. The latter owes more to those modern institutions – in particular new technologies – which contribute towards shaping a reified image of the enemy. In this highly contested area, empirical research may offer some insights.

### **Empirical framework: a sociological enquiry focusing on those French pilots who waged the war in Libya in 2011**

As stated in the introduction, this article makes use of a sociological study in order to investigate how soldiers make sense of the act of killing. The study focuses on the NATO war of 2011 in Libya and, more precisely, on those French aircraft pilots who actually dropped bombs. In the following paragraphs, I explain why I chose this particular case study and how I conducted the enquiry.



The French and NATO war in Libya in 2011 is an ideal case study to explore the act of killing in present-day warfare because it illustrates two important dimensions of contemporary Western wars, their framing as ‘humanitarian’ and the use of new technologies which introduce a greater distance between Western soldiers and the people they kill. As regards the first dynamic, NATO forces officially intervened in order to ‘preserve humanity from a greater evil’ (Weizman 2012). In fact, the decision to intervene was taken at the beginning of the Libyan civil war when Western media and governments reported that the army of President Gadhafi was about to commit massacres against the population of Benghazi.<sup>4</sup>

Several commentators have rightly pointed out that the NATO forces went well beyond this mandate, suggesting that hidden motives lay behind this humanitarian rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> At the level of public discourse, however, the war remained framed as ‘humanitarian’ until the death of Muammar Gadhafi. In contrast to the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, the other discourse justifying post-1990 Western wars – the ‘war on terror’ – did not play much of a role. Even when they emphasized Gadhafi’s historical link with ‘international terrorism’, Western mainstream media insisted on the idea that Gadhafi and his regime were oppressive to their own people. They did so by relying on some well-known Orientalist narratives, such as the story of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Ayotte and Husain 2005; Spivak 1988). Typical in this regard is the *New York Times*’ long report on how some members of the Gadhafi forces abducted and raped a woman named Eman al-Obeidy in March 2011.<sup>6</sup>

As regards the second dynamic (new technologies), this military intervention took the form of a massive air campaign against the Libyan loyalist army. NATO forces made an extensive use of those new technologies that allow killing from distance, in particular drones and high-tech fighter jets using guided munitions. It is important to highlight, in this respect, that the job of the modern fighter jet pilots in Libya is not very different from that of a drone operator. Admittedly, piloting a fighter jet is more dangerous than manipulating a joystick from a distance. However, the ‘rules of engagement’ adopted by NATO and France obliged the pilots to fly above the range of Gadhafi’s anti-air missiles and drop bombs from this altitude. This particular means of waging war resulted in one simple fact: while the number of people killed by NATO remains unknown (as we shall see in the fourth section), we know that not one single Western soldier died during this eight-month military operation.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the focus on France is justified by the fact that this country played an important role in both the decision to go to war and its conduct. Indeed, French President Nicolas Sarkozy played an important role in persuading the members of the UN Security Council to pass Resolution 1973, which authorized the NATO to use force in order to create a no-fly zone above the Libyan territory. As regards the conduct of war, the French forces claim to have been responsible for 30% of the strikes carried out by the NATO coalition.<sup>8</sup>

My empirical research focuses on those who concretely wage war (Sylvester 2012). It is based on two sets of primary sources. First, I conducted interviews with those soldiers who dropped bombs (and thus probably caused deaths), namely fighter aircraft pilots (23 interviews), fighter aircraft navigators (10), and members of the special forces (3). The importance given to fighter aircraft pilots and navigators reflects the reality of the French military intervention in Libya. Indeed, France does not have any armed drones. Therefore, most French strikes were carried out by fighter aircraft pilots drawn from the Air Force and the Navy.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the empirical enquiry aimed at understanding the conduct of war in its most concrete aspects. 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 *dispositifs* (van Veeren 2014; Holmqvist 2013). In order to grasp this dimension of war, I conducted three interviews with members of the French military command. In addition, I conducted a two-week ethnographic enquiry at French Air Force bases in Nancy, Montauban, and Paris.

Both the ethnographic study and the interviews were conducted between December 2012 and March 2013, i.e., about 18 months after the war.

### **Theoretical approach: identifying the ‘frames’ (J. Butler) which mediate the actual conduct of war**

It is a commonplace to state that any sociological research is the product of an interaction between two practices: the practice of collecting data, and the practice of building hypotheses. The exact nature of this interaction has led to some important epistemological debates. On the one hand, some scholars have advocated an inductive approach, which consists of moving from observations to broader generalizations (James 1981). On the other hand, other scholars have proposed the opposite, i.e., devising clear hypotheses before putting them to the test (Popper and Miller 1983). In this article, I rely on a reflective or critical epistemology which rejects both options and assumes, following Adorno and others, that research takes the form of an ‘experiment’ (Adorno 1969, 132), where theorization and observation ‘interpenetrate each other’ (Adorno 1969, 131). In this particular research, the ‘experiment’ took the form of a resonance and ‘interpenetration’ between the aforementioned empirical observations and Judith Butler’s critical theory of ‘frames of war’ (Butler 2004, 2009, 2010).

Butler devised the concept of ‘frame of war’ in order to account for those meaning structures which mediate the moral and emotional relation towards violence. As noted by Zehfuss and MacLeish, Butler has not studied how these frames of interpretation take form at the level of the military (Zehfuss 2009; Macleish 2013). Her book *Frames of War* gathers together several essays on the social construction of compassion in contemporary discourse. Butler tries to understand why modern subjects tend to feel concerned by the suffering and deaths of some people (including that of people who do not belong to their community), while remaining completely indifferent to the suffering and deaths of others (Butler 2004). The cases she studied – media reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the US policy of humiliating prisoners in Guantanamo, the treatment of Muslim immigrants in Europe, etc. – are to some extent remote from my argument. Indeed, this article deals with a particular kind of warfare – humanitarian and technological wars such as that waged by NATO in Libya – and I do not claim that my findings apply to all wars studied by Butler (the ‘war on terror’, the ‘war against immigration’, etc.). Besides, she takes a philosophical stance that raises the question of the ethical response one should make to the question of the ungrievability of certain lives. Although I find this question very important, I do not claim to have any solution to offer. Rather, my interest in Butler’s work is based on the following three ideas.

Firstly, Butler helps towards overcoming the materialism versus idealism debate, which has interested some International Relations (IR) scholarship. She assumes, in accordance with the most recent advocates of discourse theory (Torfing 2005), that conceiving reality as a discourse does not mean giving priority to ideas over matter (Foucault 1966), to moral values over technologies (Latour and Venn 2002), or to identities over interests (McSweeney 1999). In practice, ideas and materialities mutually constitute each other. Hence, ‘discourse is defined as an empirical collection of practices that qualify as discursive in so far as they contain a semiotic element’ (Torfing 2005, 7).

Applied to the question of war, this discursive approach does not ‘imply that life and death are direct consequences of discourse (an absurd conclusion, if taken literally). Rather, it implies that there is no life and no death without a relation to a frame’ (Butler 2010, 7).

Secondly, Butler shows – in line with the discursive approach proposed by Foucault (Foucault 1997 [1976]) – that the ‘frames of war’ are inseparable from relations of power. She observes that they are like ‘frames’ of any kind: they are ‘always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality’ (Butler 2010, xi). Liberal political discourse, for instance, may be more inclusive than others. It is possibly more generous than, say, the racist discourse that emerged in Germany in the 1930s (to give only one suggestive example) (Hutchison 2014). Yet this discourse firmly keeps out of the frame those who do not meet its ontology of the human: Muslim women who choose to wear the veil in France (Butler 2010, 75), immigrants who do not pass the tests of ‘gay-friendliness’ in the Netherlands (Butler 2010, 105), detainees held in Guantanamo (Butler 2010, 55), etc.

According to Butler, the selective character of frames of war is particularly noticeable in the way Westerners reacted to the 9/11 attacks on the one hand, and the ensuing US war on terror on the other. After observing that the victims of the former engendered an incommensurate (and legitimate) collective emotion, Butler asks about the latter: ‘Why is it that we are not given the names of the war dead, including those the US has killed, of whom we will never have the image, the name, the story, never a testimonial shard of their life, something to see, to touch, to know?’ (Butler 2010, 39). Butler’s argument is that these lives – more numerous by far than the 2973 victims of the 9/11 attacks – remain ‘ungrievable’ because they are the blanks of contemporary discourse.

This last comment helps in clarifying the third (and most important) idea that I find articulates with my research findings, namely this notion of ‘ungrievable lives’. As pointed out in the introduction, Butler defines ungrievable lives as ‘those that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, *ontologically, and from the start* [my emphasis] already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed’ (Butler 2010, xix).

This notion brings an important nuance to the aforementioned critical sociological literature on contemporary Western wars. Of course, Butler would agree with those critical sociologists when they state that modern technologies of war – new weapons (Der Derian 2009), military language (Cohn 1987), military ‘strategic common sense’ (Wasinski 2010), etc. – distort soldiers’ perceptions and shape a ‘reified’ (Honneth 2007) image of the enemy (see above). Yet she would probably argue, in addition to this, that those lives would likely remain invisible in the absence of such distorting instruments because the whole discourse – i.e., the whole reality we live in – contributes towards making some lives ‘ungrievable’. This emerges, for instance, from Butler’s study of how Israeli mainstream media participated – along with the aforementioned military *dispositifs* – in the reification of the victims of the Israeli war in Gaza in 2008–2009: ‘We are asked to believe that those children are not really children, are not really alive, that they have already been turned to metal, to steel, that they belong to the machinery of bombardment, at which point the body of the child is conceived as nothing more than a militarized metal that protects the attacker against attack’ (Butler 2010, xxvii).

Applied to the question under investigation, this argument implies, for instance, that the two important dynamics at stake during the war in Libya – the framing of the war as humanitarian and the use of new technologies – do not work as antagonistic forces. Following Butler, I will not contend, for instance, that the former dynamic would enlarge

the military economy of compassion and that the latter would call into question this dynamic, thus, fashioning a dominant framing, which would be incompletely humanitarian or incompletely reifying. Rather, Butler's framework helps us to understand that these two dynamics come together to define the space between grievable and un-grievable lives. I elaborate further on this idea in the following paragraphs by exploring some of the concrete contours – and blanks – of this 'discursive formation' (Foucault 1969).

### **Argument: when killing enemies does not count**

The general argument developed in this article is that the ideas and materialities, which shaped the NATO and French war in Libya, led to the complete erasure of enemies. The latter were neither framed as an object of hatred, nor of strategy, nor of sacrifice, nor as anything else. They were 'ungrievable lives' in the sense described above: they were 'ontologically, and from the start already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed' (Butler 2010, xix). Empirically, this spectacular case of misrecognition materialized in the fact that enemies 'did not count'. They did not count in the sense that they were not quantified (1). And they did not count in the sense that they had no importance (2).

### ***Dead enemies are not quantified***

As pointed out by Weizman and Shaw, modern Western wars take place within the realm of mathematical reasoning (Weizman 2012; Shaw 2006). Western soldiers perform mathematical calculations at all decision-making levels: does the fact of waging war preserve humanity from a greater evil? Which technology will permit the right 'military effect' to be obtained? Is it rational to drop the bomb (and save X lives) given that the probability of causing collateral damage is Y? In the case of the war in Libya, this logic emerged from the fact that NATO provided many statistics on the actual conduct of war. NATO published very precise figures concerning the number of aerial missions (26,323), the number of bombing raids (9658), the number of bombs and missiles (7700).<sup>10</sup> However, NATO has not provided any figures concerning the number of Gadhafi combatants killed during the war.

The absence of statistics concerning the number of pro-Gadhafi combatants killed during this war does not simply reflect the fact that NATO does not want to communicate about it. I conducted an interview with a high-ranking French officer in charge during the war in Libya. The interview lasted more than two hours and I believe that we reached a rather high level of confidence. However, this general assured me that he too was unable to provide any order of magnitude concerning the number of Gadhafi combatants killed during this war:

[Interviewer] You tell me that there was no collateral damage. But there were casualties among the Gadhafists. Do you know how many? I could not find any number in the press ...

[General X] No. I don't have any number. This is really not the kind of counting we used to do. Besides, we had no means to do it. It's important to repeat that there were no troops on the ground. (...) So I am unable ... Un-able. I am even unable to give you an order of magnitude.

[Interviewer] Not even an order of magnitude? I am surprised. We know that conflicts are very different in this respect. Some cause many casualties. Others much less. The Second World War, for instance, is not exactly the equivalent of the Yom Kippur war ...

[General X] No. I am unable, here, to give you any number. I don't have any idea. Honestly. Truly.<sup>11</sup>

This absence of counting holds true at the level of active combatants as well. When I asked the pilots how many people they had killed, most of them hesitated for a while. They did not find the question embarrassing. They did not think it was awkward. They were not surprised either (after all, this question was all the more topical given the subject of the study). They simply hesitated before answering: 'two or three', 'about ten', 'maybe a hundred'. My guess is that their initial hesitation reflected one simple thing: they had not really thought of counting before the interview took place.

It is important to add at this stage that this absence of counting is not the sole preserve of the military. The *New York Times*,<sup>12</sup> the *Guardian*,<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch,<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International,<sup>15</sup> and several other newspapers and NGOs carried out studies on the ground to ascertain the NATO death toll in Libya. They produced innumerable figures on this war's alleged 'collateral' victims. They have not said a word about the number of Libyan loyalist combatants killed by the 7700 NATO bombs.

This observation resonates with one of Butler's remarks: 'Even when it proves possible to know what the numbers are, the numbers may not matter at all. In other words, there are situations when counting clearly does not count. Some people are horrified to learn the number of war dead, but for others, those numbers do not matter' (Butler 2010, xx). Butler notes that this low level of interest in numbers is all the more surprising given that 'we are used to hearing, for instance, that quantitative methods reign in the social sciences, and that qualitative methods do not 'count' for very much at all' (Butler 2010, xxi). In order to understand this, she argues, one has to admit that 'certain implicit schemes of conceptualization operate quite powerfully to orchestrate what we can admit as reality; they function through ritualized forms of disavowal, so even the positivist weight of numbers does not stand as a chance against them' (Butler 2010, xxi). In the case under investigation, these 'implicit schemes' materialized in the fact that the enemies killed were of no importance.

### *Enemies killed are of no importance*

The phrase 'enemies do not count' can also be translated by 'enemies are of no importance'. By this, I do not mean that the pilots feel contempt for the people they kill. Indeed, such a statement would imply that they represent them in a negative way, an argument that would contradict all the data I have collected. Rather, I mean that the enemies are the blanks in the contemporary discourse. Indeed, military historians teach us that enemies have been represented in different ways throughout history: as dangerous others, as military objectives, as totems one honors before or after the battle, etc. Those pro-Gadhafi combatants who died in Libya were none of these. I will illustrate this by commenting on a social practice, which is less trivial than appears at first sight, namely how modern fighter jet pilots celebrate their 'successful missions'.

This celebration takes the form of a little party which brings together the pilot, his navigator, the technicians, and some of the other pilots in the detachment. They take place in a masculine and virile atmosphere similar to that described by several feminist students

of war (Agathangelou 2002; Cohn 1987; Enloe 1990). The pilots and their colleagues meet over a couple of beers and comment (often coarsely) on the success of the mission.

When asked about the sense of these celebrations, the pilots put forward the following reasons. First, they emphasize that these ‘successful missions’ have to be celebrated because they give ‘concrete expression to training’. They also highlight the need to celebrate the success collectively, i.e., ‘with all the team, including the technicians who work a lot and do not have the chance to be in the cockpit’. They also point out that the French Air Force has set up a system according to which each bomb dropped leads to the award of a medal, and that ‘it always feels good to be rewarded for one’s job’. Finally, they explain that these parties maintain the tradition of their predecessors who celebrated their victories during air duels with other ‘knights of the sky’.

Whatever the reasons for these parties, they illustrate that the contemporary way of waging war has gone through some important changes. Indeed, the tradition which consists of celebrating the death of the enemy is scarcely new. Anthropologists have described hundreds of rituals where the killing of the enemy is symbolically represented before or after the actual use of force (Girard 1972). Yet the parties I am talking about here differ from these rituals in one major aspect. Whereas the traditional sacrificial rituals display an explicit link between the enemy and its representation (the signified and the signifier, to use the linguistic terminology), the enemy is completely absent from these modern ceremonies. It is not represented as an Other, or as an evil, or in a more abstract ‘totemized’ way (see below). The enemy is just not there.

Instead, the whole party revolves around one single object: the bomb. Indeed, the bomb is not only the main subject of conversation. It is also represented visually in various ways. For instance, I saw several pictures where the victorious pilot had round his neck a signboard similar to those worn at stag parties but where the bomb was symbolized with a human face. On another picture, the pilots had drawn a bomb with a sexy woman riding it sidesaddle. Finally, I saw various photographs of pilots painting a little bomb on their aircraft’s fuselage, just like their predecessors used to paint a little plane after each ‘victory’ against another ‘knight of the sky’.

This last example perhaps calls for a brief history of how airmen have stopped representing their enemies. As stated above, First World War pilots counted their victories by painting little planes on their own aircraft’s fuselage. With the subsequent vast increase in bombing operations, Second World War pilots began painting little buildings, factories, or bridges, depending on the mission. To a certain extent, all these paintings (planes, buildings, etc.) maintained a thread – however tenuous – with the dead enemies. Whether they were honored or hated, the dead enemies still signified, just as a dead combatant is signified in a depersonalized national obituary. Nowadays, pilots paint bombs on their planes’ fuselages. Their dead enemies have lost this very last shard of recognition: being represented.

Of course, this practice of not representing enemies during the celebration of the successful missions recalls what Agamben writes about those Homo-Sacer who could be killed but not ‘sacrificed’ (Agamben 1998). More generally, this art of deciding over human lives resonates with what Foucault says about the change in the exercise of political power, which he associates with modernity (Foucault 1997 [1976], 2001). On the one hand, the different actors of this war – government leaders, military leaders, pilots, etc. – kill in the most classical and ‘disciplinary’ sense of the term. They exert a ‘sovereign’ power over those they actively kill (they decide to go to war, to devise a strategy which involves the death of others, to pull the trigger, etc.). On the other hand, these actors also ‘make live and let die’ (*faire vivre et laisser mourir*) (Foucault 1997

[1976], 214) in a good biopolitical fashion. They ‘make live’ those they pretend to protect – Western citizens, Libyan democrats, those Libyan women abused by the pro-Gadhafi army (see above), etc., and ‘let die’ those whom they misrecognize at each step in the conduct of war, i.e., those who are not quantified and do not matter enough to be hated or honored.

### Conclusion

This article aimed at understanding how Western soldiers make sense of the act of killing in the context of contemporary Western wars. In order to answer this question, I carried out a sociological study of French soldiers who participated in the 2011 war in Libya. My argument is that the French soldiers and officers who waged this war are caught in a power regime, which leads to the complete obliteration of the enemy. The latter is not conceived of as an object of hatred, or as an object of strategy, or as an object of sacrifice. The dead enemy simply does not count.

I am unable to assess whether the framing of war described above applies to all contemporary Western wars. Indeed, one could fairly object that the ‘war on terror’ – and its associated ‘targeted’ and ‘deliberate’ killings are based on a different logic or set of principles. I am also unable to assess whether this rather biopolitical way of erasing lives is fundamentally new. Indeed, one could fairly follow Agamben when he states that biopolitics is not a product of modernity but consubstantial with political power in general (Agamben 1998).

I can argue, however, that this framing of war has found a significant form in the context of humanitarian and technological wars. Indeed, the fact that these two frames of war – the ideational frame of humanitarian war on the one hand, and new technologies on the other – emerged simultaneously is not coincidental. These two logics are part of the same discursive formation. They are ‘technological morals’ or ‘moral technologies’ (Latour and Venn 2002, 248). They rely on a common ontology of the human, i.e., a precise understanding of what a ‘modern subject’ is, or should be (Mavelli 2013; Seth 2013). To put this simply, one may say that the framing of war as humanitarian is an attempt to export this modern subject overseas (or to support those groups which allegedly defend this ontology of the human), and that the use of new technologies is an attempt to protect this modern subject – incarnated by the Western combatant – at all costs.

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### Notes

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/world/africa/scores-of-unintended-casualties-in-nato-war-in-libya.html?pagewanted=all>
2. This point is frequently made by some liberal institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.
3. The notion of ‘civilizing process’ owes a lot to the work of Norbert Elias, although Elias – who was a direct witness of the two World Wars – never stated that this process applied to international relations. On the notion of civilizing process, see Elias (2000 [1939]). On the problem posed by the two world wars to an Eliasian theory of international relations, see Audouin-Rouzeau (2010) and Linklater (2007).



4. 'L'intervention en Libye a évité "des milliers de morts" selon Sarkozy', *Le Monde*, 25.03.2011.
5. Vinogradoff, Luc, 'L'intervention en Libye critiquée sur le fond et sur la forme', *Le Monde*, 25.03.2011.
6. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/world/africa/28tripoli.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/world/africa/28tripoli.html?_r=2&)
7. [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2011\\_11/20111108\\_111107-factsheet\\_up\\_facts-figures\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_11/20111108_111107-factsheet_up_facts-figures_en.pdf)
8. <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/dossiers/operation-harmattan>
9. The fact that the enquiry does not include drone operators may appear to be a limitation given the importance of this technology in modern warfare. However, it is important to repeat that the job of modern fighter jet pilots in Libya was not very different from that of a drone operator. The pilots and navigators were not exposed to the enemy's fire, with the result that the main risks they took were aeronautic and little different from training situations.
10. [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2011\\_11/20111108\\_111107-factsheet\\_up\\_factsfigures\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_11/20111108_111107-factsheet_up_factsfigures_en.pdf)
11. [interviewer]: On a vu qu'il n'y a pas eu de victime collatérale. Mais il y a eu des morts côté Kadhafiste. Est-ce qu'on a idée du nombre ? Je n'ai pas trouvé de chiffres.  
[General X] Non. Je n'ai pas de chiffre. C'est vraiment le type de comptabilité qu'on ne faisait pas et que, d'ailleurs, on n'avait pas les moyens de faire. Il faut quand même se rappeler qu'il n'y a pas de forces au sol ... (...) Donc moi je suis incapable ... In-ca-pa-ble. Mais je ne suis même pas capable de vous dire un ordre d'idée.  
[Interviewer]: Pas même un ordre de grandeur ? Je suis surpris. Nous savons que les conflits sont très différents sur ce point. Certains font beaucoup de morts. D'autres beaucoup moins. La Seconde guerre mondiale, par exemple, ce n'est pas la même chose que la guerre du Kippour ...  
[General X]: Non. Je suis incapable, là, de vous donner un ordre d'idées. Incapable. Très honnêtement, mais très honnêtement.
12. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/world/africa/scores-of-unintended-casualties-in-nato-war-in-libya.html?pagewanted=all>
13. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct26/libya-war-saving-lives-catastrophic-failure>
14. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/24/libya-apparent-execution-53-Gadhafi-supporters>
15. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE19/025/2011/en>

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