

ON SCAPEGOATING

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This paper reviews the scapegoating process against minorities and individuals, and identifies its implications for human rights abuses.

Questo articolo descrive sommariamente le proprietà del processo di genesi del capro espiatorio orientato verso minoranze ed individui, ed identifica implicazioni per gli abusi contro i diritti umani.



Figura 1 The illustration depicts an anthropophagite monster -- the personification of the "yellow peril" -- the way Chinese immigrants were perceived to be on the West Coast of the United States around 1870. Note that the monster is attacking especially people belonging to the lower classes or defenseless -- working class women and men as well a little child. Cartoons like this served the purpose of spreading diffidence, animosity and to justify hostility. It is tempting to remark the similarity between this hate-mongering picture and the claims of "ritual murder" of little children that Nazi used against Jews.

1 Introduction

Biblic tradition says a scapegoat was a live goat over whose head Aaron confessed all the sins of the children of Israel on the Day of Atonement. The goat, symbolically bearing their sins, was then sent into the wilderness. The term scapegoat has become, in current English usage, a synonym for someone who is made to bear the blame of others. Does scapegoating occur in social groups, or in the whole society at large? The answer is definitely yes. It is clear that scapegoating is not the simple substitution of one person for another. It is a much more complicated process especially if occurring between large groups, and especially worrisome if there is a large imbalance of power, as in the case of large groups and individuals. Scapegoating may take the form of a ritual equivalent to human sacrifice, or be literally a human sacrifice. Scapegoating is instrumental to the worst violations of human rights against individuals and minorities, including genocide.

2 Scapegoating as a Form of Group behavior

Scapegoating seems to be a rooted pattern of collective behavior, as it survives in so many groups and apparently enlightened and “free” societies in North America and Europe, even if it takes forms that in most cases are explicitly forbidden by fundamental laws (actually, overruling basic norms and laws may be seen as a defining property of scapegoating). Ineffective, but extremely tempting and appealing, scapegoating appears obvious and natural in a way that defies reason. “Natural” as it was the human sacrifice carried out every day to the god Quetzalcoatl to let the sun rise the day after. But who, among all Atzechs could be so perverted not to want that the sun could rise the day after?

Social behavior can be very different from individual behavior. A group is not as bound to ethical laws as an individual can be. A group can redefine ethical values, rules and norms – what is right, acceptable and true – within itself. An individual can in principle do the same, but the outcome will be different. Individual redefinition of norms and values is weak. Such redefinition, if applied as personal behavior, may sever social ties and may easily put the individual itself in jeopardy since he or she has no social source of self assurance. Ultimately, the individual may become marginalized. Doing socially-approved and valued actions creates a feedback that sustains the self, like in the ideal case of “the hero walking across the cheering crowd.” A member of the group will mirror himself or herself in other members of the groups that are convinced to act rightfully. The larger the group, the stronger the self assurance, and, ultimately, the lack of individual responsibility.

3 Scapegoating as a ritual

Scapegoating may take the form of a ritual. A ritual reinforces social ties. There are however two kinds of rituals. One that is liberating, full-filling and ripe for

achievements, and one that is just the opposite: demeaning and alienating, in which no substantial improvement is sought or achieved. The participation in a collective enterprise like space exploration offers many ritual aspects that lead to objective achievements. Another example of the bright side of the ritual is the “greeting”. Greeting is a codified ritual. Raising one’s arm and hand straight was the Nazi ritual of belonging, and as any other ritual of belongings, it brings relief. Sharing a value and acting according to it, sometime in opposition to an antagonist group is reassuring. Scapegoating is the dark side of “rituals of belonging”. Valuing an ancient tree as a sacred spot, since the community of the village gathers there since time immemorial, is the positive side of belonging; killing the foreigners that had breakfast and rested under the shadows of the tree branches because they violated the sacred tree is its dark side. The “*paradox of the sacred tree*” is an unfortunate and frequent occurrence. Too often a group or society steps from emphasizing the features that unite them into attempting to destroy anyone that does not conform without even being aware of those features and values.

4 Scapegoating as an Alienation Process

Scapegoating can be a self-destructive process, as it is basically a process of alienation; it is the way a dying society disguise its septic lunacy into the sickening madness of stigmatized individuals or minorities. It is a process that gives a surge of self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment - intense but ephemeral as it leaves real problems unsolved or worsened. Suppose the sailors in a ship which is embarking water stop pumping or throwing water out of the ship and they suddenly start kicking a black cat because they believe it is responsible of their misfortune. If everyone works at throwing water out, the ship *may not* or *may still* sink; however, if everyone stops throwing water out, the ship will *certainly* sink. The “*black cat*” *paradox* summarized the double alienation produced in the scapegoating process: (i) awareness of the real urgency is lost; nothing is done to solve real problems that may worsen or become unsolvable with time; (ii) the real view of the scapegoat is lost: the label enforces stereotypes and perceptions that become a self-fulfilling prophecy (the ship *must sink* because *black cats carry bad luck*). Conditions that make scapegoating possible include ethical and moral guidance that are not apt to cope with real conditions, norms and rules imposing values that lead to heavy behavioral restraint: a self-destroying sacrifice becomes the behavioral counterpart of value. Such conditions may help some *core values* become anthropologically surcharged.¹

¹ We call *anthropologically surcharged* values which have acquired an anthropological worth, i. e., which are *instinctively* perceived as related to the *survival* of the self and of the kin. Such values may be anthropologically rooted, in the sense that they define and distinguish individuals and groups on the basis of anthropological properties (for example, race), or may be the products of a fairly intricate super-structure, entangled with sets of rules and norms apparently devoid of any anthropological basis. In both

5 Advantages of Scapegoating

Scapegoating would probably not occur if it were not perceived as advantageous. The first advantage of scapegoating is that it is a self-protective process: it protect the individual from unbearable conflicts. It can involve projection - a psychological defense mechanism in which one attributes to others characteristics that one is unwilling to recognize in oneself. Many people with personal traits they dislike in themselves have an understandable desire to get rid of such traits, but this is not always possible. Therefore, they may “project” some of these traits onto others (often to some other group in society), thus displacing the negative feeling they would otherwise direct at themselves. In the process, they then reject and condemn those onto whom they have projected the traits.

A strong advantage in scapegoating is that the whole society or a whole social group is raised in status against the targeted minority or individual, and any societal behavior is at the same time legitimized (“Of course we are full of defects, but we do not acts like *them*”). Intrinsically damaging conditions or behaviors may be overlooked. It is not surprising that scapegoating may easily become a process of self-deception and alienation. The process slides into a self sustaining paranoia in which perception of real danger and of real pressures is wishfully lost.

6 Scapegoating and Fascism

The quest for strong leadership and scapegoating are two sides of the same coin. One should first consider that the “strong leaders” – dictators like Hitler and Mussolini – were mass-men. They were identifiable with the average German or Italian of the time, with their aspirations, dreams, and especially frustrations. A large fraction of the lower middle class was willing to relinquish political responsibility – they felt they were putting *one of them* in charge -- and were, in a way, empowering themselves. One of them that would also act like them. Both scapegoating and a strong leadership would thus legitimate the habits and the zaniest fancies of the mass-men. A second factor is that such dictatorships do not rise in times of prosperity and self-assurance: they rise under economic, or physical pressure, a condition that, under certain conditions, will favor scapegoating. As a matter of fact, several dictatorships of this century were accompanied by scapegoating of minorities.

The Jewish-Christian culture is dominated by the notion of individual responsibility. Collective responsibility is ineffectively dealt with. So, eventually, the leader becomes the sole responsible of his actions, a new scapegoat.

7 A Collective Dimension of Evil

cases, the surcharge is acquired because a value is felt *endangered*, for instance by an intervening source of physical pressure. A behavior transgressing norms and rules associated to surcharged values generates a strong, emotional reaction.

We already distinguished between a “bright” and a “dark” side of group behavior. The “dark” side is an enhancement of disruptive or meaningless behavior (as in the black cat paradox) without perception of responsibility, in a process that suppresses in part ethical and rational consciousness. Rules and norms that govern a normally working society are overruled, but just for the group that is being targeted and not for anyone else. Hence individuals retain the same degree of responsibility when dealing with other individuals belonging to the same group. Lynching and pogroms involve large group, and accounts of how they can unleash violence and hatred are countless.

Dehumanization is then a welcome (necessary?) pattern to reconcile the values of the group and the non-conforming behavior:

“Dehumanizing the victims allows group members to feel less reticent about violating society’s larger rules about social interaction. Society’s rules and morality do not apply because the victims aren’t really people.”⁽²⁾

Dehumanization and diffusion of responsibility are concomitant to the individual partial loss of rational consciousness.

And it is obvious that dehumanization works better in conditions of structural or super-structural segregation: dehumanization is the extreme in a label reinforcement process. There is no challenge within the group not only because no individual belonging to the group is immediately jeopardized, but also because each individual is enhanced with respect to individuals of the target group. Rather, it may damage one’s reputation to side with the attacked minority.

Large groups usually can maintain segregation of a target group, dehumanize the members of that group or ethically legitimize hatred and can diffuse responsibility beyond individual group members. The very possibility of the worst human rights resides in this. In addition, we already remarked that responsibility is projected elsewhere. While a source of stress may jeopardize the integrity of the individual selves and of the group as a whole, projection enhances the group against the targeted minority: “we are the best, the righteous ones.”

Individuals belonging to large group may feel less responsible because of the lack of a cognitive culture on “collective responsibility”. There is no cognitive culture acting against the feeling of self-assurance, of empowerment that is felt once everyone else in the group feels the same urge, the same need. And what is behind the urge and need is often a physical source of stress which appears as an attack to values that have become anthropologically surcharged.

² G. B. Northcraft & M. A. Meale, *Organizational Behavior*, International Thomson Publishing, Chapter 7.

This collective dimension of evil is totally ignored in Western culture. No wonder if collective behavior may seem tremendously irrational to a privileged observer. (3)

8 The Scapegoat is Perceived as Violent

The attacking group sets itself on the side of the pro-life, pro-group survival values, and they feel that it is the targeted minority which “attacks” the most cherished values of the group. The targeted group is seen as intrinsically evil: it is differentiated from the group so that it cannot share (by physical impossibility) the values of the group, and it is attacking values related to the survival of the individuals and of the group as a whole. In this sense, the minority under scapegoating cannot be recognized as ethically right, while the attacking majority perceives its behavior always as ethically right.

The self-deceptive enforcement of the label requires that the scapegoat is perceived as socially dangerous. This is implicit in the scapegoating process. A violent reaction from the scapegoat (individual or minority group) is expected in return to violent action from the attacking majority. To the members of the attacking group, violence may appear not only legitimate, but even necessary, since they feel they are acting for their survival. There may be no law or force in the world that would divert the attacking group to carry out violence to the point of massacres and extermination.

9 A Structural Weakness of Western Society

It is frightening that instinctive forces drive socially accepted behaviors today, and still affect the life of an untold number of people. Scapegoating may become literally a human sacrifice. Western society is structurally weak toward scapegoating processes that lead to human rights abuses. The nuclear family provides shelter and warmth and a feeling of security for the child – but at the same time isolates it from the other children. Few are the experiences of communal life. Few are the bonds that are kept from the first infancy till adulthood. Western society is made-up of isolated nuclei, which interact very weakly with themselves. We may ask why transgender persons were tolerated or put in a position of prominence in other cultures, for example those of Native Americans. The tepee social structure allowed for a common growth and education of children. And it is difficult to reach the point of murdering anyone who has been known and seen since early childhood. The human bond is too strong. The enemy had to be sought outside of the tribe, and the dark side Native Americans paid to their structural ability to cope with diversity within the tribe – was a cruel and endless inter-tribe warfare.

10 Conclusion: the Necessity of a “Copernican Revolution”

3 A privileged observer may be defined in close analogy with physics, e. g., as an individual that does not share the values or the momentous feeling of the group, but that, on the contrary, follows a rational model of inference.

We are in need of a Copernican revolution that may shift the center of attention from spotted individuals or minorities – to whole groups and societies, to the dark side of group behavior – which goes unnoticed and uncensored until irreversible and tragic happenings appear to explode from nothingness. Dehumanization – and the converse – the reaffirmation in an obsessive way of rightfulness and superiority – are the evidence, the symptoms on which individual judgment can rely for reveal the sickening madness of a society, under the assumption that values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are valid without exceptions, as we believe it is the case. History teaches that scapegoating of minorities has lead to tragedy and ultimately, to the self-destruction of the attacking group. Scapegoating of outstanding individuals – from Hypatia to Turing – has been associated to the decline of countries and civilizations. We will not dwell more on that. Until everyone can dehumanize someone else on the basis of different beliefs, customs, skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity etc. hate would sooner or later appear legitimate or necessary. Perhaps it is difficult to accept co-existence with groups close but different from our own under climatic, economic, demographic pressure. Perhaps to make this co-existence possible is a most important – as yet unfulfilled – goal of civilization.

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