

Waiting for the Barbarians

Who are the real barbarians? The refugees or those who caused them to flee?

Jesús Sepúlveda

2016

In August 2015, as refugees broke through a line of Macedonian police at the border between Greece and Macedonia going toward Western Europe, a phrase from the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933) came forcibly to mind: “the barbarians are coming today.” But as in Cavafy’s poem, it wasn’t clear who the barbarians really were in 2015.

Spanish friar Bartolome de las Casas referred to four categories of barbarians in his 16th century Apologetic History of the Indies (1561) to argue in favor of the rational mind of “the people of these Indies,” who were “meek as lambs,” slaves by nature. He endorsed the idea that the condition of the barbarians was a disability that could be improved so they could reach the correct level of civilization.

Following Aristotelian precepts, the 16th century Spanish colonizers determined early—through these four categories—who the barbarians were. The first category referred to those people characterized as brutal and cruel, although the conquistadors paradoxically fit better into this category.

The second one referred to the non-European native peoples who needed to be evangelized. The third alluded to those who could not speak the empire’s languages (then Spanish and Latin, today it’s English). The last category referred to the infidels, those people who did not know or did not want to accept Christianity as a dogma, especially Native people, Jews and Muslims; this designation justified the extension of the Inquisition to the Americas and laid a basis for the violence of today’s fundamentalisms.

Spanish epic poet Alonso de Ercilla wrote in his *La Araucana* in 1569 that Araucanian (Mapuche people from Chile and Argentina) were barbarians because they could not be tamed, and because they were such warriors—like Greek heroes—who could only be fought. Almost 450 years later, Mapuche people keep fighting to protect their homeland, which is not defined by a border, but a sense of belonging to a territory—Mapu, the living and conscious Earth, Gaia.

Today, barbarians also designate a group of people who don’t exist in legal terms—undocumented people, people without papers, illegal people. “Soy una raya en el mar, fantasma en la ciudad, mi vida va prohibida, dice la autoridad” (I’m a line on the ocean, a ghost in the city, my life is forbidden, the authority says) sings French-Spanish musician Manu Chao.

That was the case of more than five hundred Eritrean and Somalis, including a woman giving birth, drowned while their boat sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2013. It was the case of those sixty thousand children detained on the US-Mexico border in 2014. It was the case reported in the news in 2015 and 2016 of the thousands of refugees, largely from war-torn Syria, crossing the Republic of Macedonia toward the so-called civilized Europe.

On this side of the Atlantic, the U.S. is the inner-border that people who smuggle themselves onto the “Beast” aim to cross. The “Beast” is the train that runs across Mexico into this country, transporting people from nearly all Central American nations. But the war on immigration inside the borders of the empire has come to a crescendo.

The fascist-oriented, racist and populist rhetoric of the American right wing in the 2016 electoral show is a good indicator of that. Business elites don’t see people. They only understand the language of profit, the need for cheap

labor, and the movement of merchandise. In the global market, people cannot transit freely across the world as commodities can. That's called the free market.

Refugees, Roma, homeless people and wanderers have always challenged borders—national, economic, and cultural ones. Today's massive immigration challenges the capacity of the empire to determine who is a legitimate citizen of civilization and who is not. Civilization requires barbarians—the hostile Others—on its borders as part of its self-definition. Orwell called the extramural area Big Brother could not control “the wild zone.”

In that view, the barbarian has to match the image of a dangerous, cruel, and merciless savage in order to fit the stereotyped notion of the wild zone's inhabitant. This image is part of the capitalist production process. Big Brother needs to create its own enemy in order to justify the existence of its expansive control.

The image of that enemy must be one of a wild savage. If barbarians are too uniform, they can be confused with an army or a guerrilla group, not a wild savage in black with automatic firearms. This image needs indeed to be updated and upgraded as any other commercial product to be consumed by media consumers.

In fact, that image is just another merchandise. Its risk is that like all merchandise it can be sold. The tragedy is that credulous people can buy that merchandise—and be convinced to blow themselves up in the name of their only god. The dance of politics and religion has been a long waltz.

Each time I see the internet images of ISIS fighters, they bring to mind the TV show “Sandokan” (based on the story by 19th century Italian writer Emilio Salgari) that I used to watch as a boy in Chile. My friends and I all hoped for a character like Sandokan and his borderless pirates to come fight and end the Pinochet dictatorship.

Who manufactures the image of a rebel—a novelist? an advertiser? a computer expert? In one of his adventure stories, *Sandokan: The Tigers of Mompracem*, Salgari portrays the pirates as dressed in black, using bandannas and having long hair while fighting the British colonialists.

ISIS fundamentalists also dress in black. They have long beards and fight against Western civilization. But the pirates were pictured as living autonomously, in tune with nature. They protected communities and nourished the utopian imaginations of anarchists and other free-spirited people.

ISIS fundamentalists kidnap and decapitate civilians. They follow a dogma and disguise themselves as charismatic leaders to attract young people who perhaps also wish to end their repressive circumstances. Their ends justify their means. But we already know that the means determine the ends. That's been the bloody course of civilization.

Subcomandante Marcos knew something about the astute use of images and iconography. In 1994, when the Zapatistas launched their first armed resistance to the so-called free trade agreements they not only enhanced the mystique of their national liberation army by the aura their balaclavas had created, they also fought symbolically.

They had to mask themselves in order to unmask the new corporatocracy that was trying to incorporate Chiapas into the global supermarket. The definition and semiotics of the term barbarian must be updated and studied today in the various intelligence agencies. They have surely graduated a couple of specialists in the subject by now

But human psychology is a puzzle. Under oppressive conditions, people tend to look for saviors. Zorro and Sandokan were my favorite role models when I was a boy. In the neighborhood where I grew up some people embraced Christ, others Marx and Mao.

Saviors create a border between free human beings (those who embrace and pursue their potential for freedom) and those who consider themselves disempowered (the “meek lambs,” to use friar Las Casas' term).

Accepting the imaginary territorial borders drawn by states requires first accepting borders in the mind. Thus, the struggle for freedom is also a deep work of consciousness. Awareness opens mental jails. People become their own saviors when they adopt this path of liberation. Freedom is incompatible with political power because, sooner rather than later, political power transforms the freedom it advertises into a military parade.

Leftist groups throughout Latin America emulated the Sierra Maestra's rebels who took power in Cuba 57 years ago. Arguably, the image of Che is one of the most successful commodities that the market for radical consumers has manufactured—T- Shirts, magnets, posters, postcards, etc. Images mediate social relationships and conform to the picture of the world in this society of virtual spectacle. Dressing in black, like the anarchists of the Black Bloc who marched in Seattle in 1999 (and elsewhere since), like those pirates of Salgari's novels, is an image that the screen started to reproduce in this century, over and over. Civilization needs enemies to keep up its expansion, and justify its weaponry and military complex.

Constantine Cavafy beautifully exposed this simple truth in his well-known poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” published in 1904, solving the civilization/barbarianism equation by opposition. He wrote:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Last year I was on the shore of the Ohrik Lake—one of the deepest lakes in the Balkans—when the refugees were crossing the border. At that time, barbarians were bombing Syria. Barbarians were desolating neighborhoods, villages, and cities. Barbarians were (and are) at war.

I remember clearly hearing the murmur of the waters of that sublime lake, pulsing to heal and clean while a young Macedonian poet confessed—“I have friends who grew up in my neighborhood and went to school with me who started getting infuriated by the devastation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Mali, Gaza, and went to get trained to become Islamist fighters. They were middle-class kids who became radical fundamentalists. Most of them were shot and died at age 20. They wasted their lives.”

When the limits of our lives become the limits of geography we are facing a “policy of exclusion,” writes British journalist and historian Frances Stonor Saunders. The exclusion outlines borders and maps the world. The exclusion needs its counterparts in the inner borders—seclusion. Reservations, ghettos, apartheid have been part of the history of this policy of exclusion and segregation, redefining the figure of the barbarian.

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Human control over Mother Earth has extended through a practice of territorialization, bordering the planet with political maps, nation-state limits, customs, and military frontiers. J.M. Coetzee’s 1980 novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, of the same title as Cavafy’s poem, is a perfect allegory of western colonialism and imperial violence and territorialization in which borders seem to be so artificial and yet so violently real.

Thus, this situation necessarily unfolds the question of who the barbarians are. People who don’t want to be at war, especially now that war has reached the interior borders of civilization, and the world trembles everywhere must certainly respond to this question.

First, the Twin Towers in New York were destroyed by a “bearded man” who “masterminded” a “spectacular attack” from the “caves of Afghanistan,” resembling the image of Ali Baba and the forty thieves hidden in the “wild zone.”

Last year, it was Paris. This year, it is Brussels. Meanwhile, the shocks of bombs still reverberate in Istanbul, Bali, Casablanca, Madrid, Bombay, Nairobi, Alexandria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Kenya, among many other places. Kamikaze-terrorist attacks are part of a logic that reinforces the brutal dialectics of civilization and barbarianism.

How can a human being be convinced to commit suicide in order to kill if not through a logic of war? How can a soldier be convinced to risk his or her life to go abroad to kill? Bombs and drones on the extramural side of the border only bring death. In between the wild zone and civilization there is a border. Each time immigrants and refugees trespass on it, the whole system trembles. They are transient people who challenge the policies of exclusion.

They are the byproduct of the wars initiated by others—those who are in need of the existence of the barbarians, so they themselves can exist.

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Fifth Estate #396, Summer, 2016

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