Safe As Death

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> "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." — Benjamin Franklin

It's a problem that gets talked about a lot, but whose diagnosis is terse. On the right and on the left, the verdict is the same: we live in an "unsafe climate".

Everyday the news showers us with gallons of blood gathered at the scenes of ambushes, rapes, murders. Bloody events described and filmed with a maniacal wealth of details, making horrible shivers run up our spines that are already weakened by daily genuflections.

Watching the misfortunes of others is no longer a consolation. We aren't able to heave a sigh of relief at having escaped it. It is a nightmare, because these misfortunes seem to press against the screens, so as to hurl themselves onto our living room carpets. And if one day we become the protagonists of these news broadcasts that now drip only death? Prey to terror, we begin to triple lock the door, not talking to the neighbor or going out at night any more. Panic spreads as the following certainty is generalized: lack of safety is the scourge of our times. If it is solved, the gates of paradise will open for us.

To be blunt, there is some perplexity over the real increase in violence. Facing explicit demands, the "experts" themselves are forced to recognize that there is no substantial difference in comparison to the past: the leap in statistics is the fruit of different bookkeeping criteria. But also of *visibility*. It works like this. The political class puts the question of safety at the center of all its interventions. Journalists, accomodating to their masters as usual, repeat the concerns of the politicians and enhance them, illustrating them with news items. There is no lack of news to report.

If the stories aren't relegated to a paragraph on the fifteenth page, they will expand out of proportion until they become exemplary. All that remains to the politicians is to comment about them and the play is made: "Do you see that our concerns were more than justified, they were indisputable? There truly is a safety problem!"

Ultimately, all this ado would not have much importance if it didn't aim to spread terror among the people, pushing them to demand drastic measures from their representatives. Against whom? Why, against those petty criminals who become giants of crime as soon as they end up under the spotlight.

It goes wiothout saying that petty criminals are not exactly at the top of the list of problems that disturb our lives. Quite different problems place our survival and that of our times in danger. The planet is threatened by ecological imbalance, cuts and restructuring loom over workplaces, our houses are at the mercy of theft by the banks, our health is threatened by the poisons we eat and breathe. Our entire existence is threatened by immanent danger (no to speak of current and future wars with their unforeseeable collateral effects), whose consequences are much worse than the theft of a wallet on the bus. The inventory of possible misfortunes is so vast, our days pass so much under the sign of precariousness and misery, that it is completely crazy to think that petty criminals are the cause of the social malaise.

Well, then, why the hell is it repeated until we're dizzy that aggression waits in ambush just around the corner? Simple. Because the state can dress up as the Great Protector around which to rally and the Righter of Wrongs to whom to turn. Muggers, purse-snatchers, drug dealers, rapists or murderers — random or hardened, real or presumed, native or foreign — not being the ones responsible for environmental devastations, job losses, financial devastation, food adulteration, workplace accidents, bombings of civilians, famines that afflict the world or any other great social problem, is it necessary to reveal those who are most directly responsible for all these occurrences? The punishment of chicken thieves in the public square serves the state and its hired killers by diverting the general attention from the private foraging of the sharks. One worry drives out another — this is why the institutions spread a panic to be attributed *to someone else*, feeding it continuously and increasing it in every way.

As a result, the hang-up about safety provides another advantage to the political class, justifying its recourse to increasingly tougher and more severe measures demanded by the population itself, to obtain, first of all, "the certainty of punishment". (For whom? but that is another matter.) Be that as it may, a population terrorized by the possibility of having their pocket picked applauds the increase in the forces of order. A population intimidated by crimes committed by immigrants welcomes the CPTs (Centers of Temporary Residence) with relief. A population frightened by the possibility of finding that someone has broken into their house is favorable

to the spreading network of surveillance, and so on. But the provisions enacted in the name of the struggle against a few petty criminals will come in handy especially against the many potential rebels. More than petty criminality, the real danger to repress is social conflict. The political exploitation of the feeling of being unsafe is a formidable force for repressive laws. the climate of terror in which we live is not the natural outcome of hateful social conditions. It has been deliberately created to slip the satisfied city dweller into an unprecedented police regime. The state identifies the problem of public safety with "microcriminality" with the aim of imposing its solution: Public Safety, i.e., the cops.

All safety measures are authentic attacks on individual freedom and couldn't be taken so lightly if there hadn't been a genuine thought police operation aimed at imposing the idea that safety is the guarantee of freedom rather than its preventive negation. So the disease and the cure have been created, reconciling *safety* and *freedom* in a firm ideological alliance. An absurd alliance, impossible between two contradictory notions, which, like water and fire, cannot remain in contact without dissolving each other.

The construction sites of safety are built on the tombs of freedom. Safety has the objective of distancing all danger, while the practice of freedom, on the contrary, entails a challenge to every danger. It's no accident that the expression "making safe" usually means the act of putting something under lock and key. The typical example is that of the wild animal snatched from the jungle to be locked in a cage. In this way, the zoo administrators assure us, the animal is rescued from the dangers of the jungle and *made safe*. Behind bars it will not incur the risk of being shot by hunters or torn apart by savage beasts. Well, this animal is certainly safe, but at a heavy price — its freedom. It is well-known: when one avoids danger, one doesn't live life, one barely preserves it; because only by going to meet danger does one live life in its fullness.

Thus, safety and freedom are utterly incompatible.

"The more control thare is the safer we are," say the knuckleheaded people. And then add: "Video surveillance cameras are useful because nothing can happen under their eyes." Appalling expressions, symptoms of unconditional love for big brother. But who would want to live a life subject to *control* where *nothing happens*? Only at the cost of completely clouding the mind could one happily enter into the emotional desert through which our era trudges. Freedom is self-determination, choice of any possibility, risk, a challenge to the unknown that cannot be pampered under a glass bell.

But in our times the first quality required of an "honest" person is precisely that he conduct his life in *transparency*. A transparent person has nothing to hide, nothing to silence in his public or private life, thus, nothing to fear from others watching him. In the name of transparency, every intrusion is justified, any will

to keep a secret indicates guilt. It is curious how the private life of individuals, which was once surrounded by respect and discretion is now watched with suspicion. Through logical and rhetorical acrobatics, protecting one's secrets has been made into a shady behavior. Banishing private life, it is clear that what allows its unveiling — investigation — is consecrated as a primary value. If this is so, then the means employed for this purpose are not and cannot be questioned. A defense of wiretapping!

At first, this demand for transparency was developed to contain the abuses of those who hold power. Requiring transparency in the lives of public men, of those who have high responsibilities, has a more than understandable function. They have to answer for the way that they manage the "public thing", i.e., put in a position where they can't abuse their privileges. But the reverse demand — that common people should be transparent to the eyes of those who hold power — is more terrible than one can imagine. Under the pretext of the exchange of "information" and of mutuality in control, the foundations for totalitarianism are laid.

Already in itself, transparency at all costs has unpleasant fallout. There are areas in the human being that naturally escape every indiscreet gaze. A person's intimacy, with his sexual tastes, is one of these. There was a time when someone who was interested in the intimate life of others was accused of wallowing in rumor-mongering and looked upon with disapproval. Renamed "gossip", rumor-mongering is now considered the spice that gives flavor to otherwise insipid conversations. The dreariness of a world that has transformed private vices into public virtues.

But who stops to reflect on what the cause of this effect might be? Our houses have become caretaker's lodges[1], it's true, but it is a matter of a contraindication to the shock treatment ordered against freedom of thought. To flush out this freedom that can always be protected by the secret, the whole pile gets set on fire. The demand for freedom is the eulogy that comes before the funeral of the corpse of freedom in every sphere of human life.

And rather than rebel before the firing squad, we bow our heads. We live in a society where we are all on probation, and every day we diligently go back to sign the register of resignation. Because of the uneasiness we feel in the face of absolute freedom, without limits or boundaries; because of the deafening media overkill that causes us to see enemies everywhere, spurring us to opt for the lesser eveil of social control; but also because of our coparticipation in degradation — we feel somewhat relieved. Over the past few years, televison has reassured us about the goodness of the police, federal agents and judges — heroes of numberless tv shows — but how often has it invited us to directly spy through the keyhole. So-

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[1] In Italian, there is a saying: "gossip like a caretaker".

called 'reality shows" have had the effect of making the idea of a transparent life, that unfolds before all eyes and is periodically judged, punished and rewarded, familiar and normative.

The protest against the devastation of discretion runs into a barrier that has become classic: "if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear from control". Astounding, cop-like reasoning, which once again uses a logical reversal to make discretion a vice and meddling a virtue. Mor and more, daily life comes to resemble a prison, where they take the fingerprints of everyone born, where you walk through numberless metal detectors, where you are observed by electronic eyes, where the presumption of innocence has given way to the presumption of guilt.

There is a further consequence of the climate of terror fed by the ideology of security. If everyone feels unsafe, it means that each represents a threat to the other. Thus, there are no victims, only the guilty and the potentially guilty. If I want to be protected from my neighbor and my neighbor wants to be protected from me, it follows that we are both potentially aggressors and it would be dangerous to grant us our freedom.

We have all become suspects for what we might do if we used our freedom. The state goes all the way with this logic and asserts its right to punish this threat even in its most innocuous manifestations — even preventatively repressing it. Earlier at least, it was maintained that the individual would become punishable by law when he put his transgressive intents into practice. Anyone could dream of killing, you just couldn't do it with impunity (unless you were dressed in a uniform, of course). Western, democratic civilizations loved to shove its superiority over other civilizations down our throats. These other civilizations were judged as obscurantist because they did not guarantee complete freedom of thought to those within them. Just lying propaganda, of course, but that at least had to disguise itself to appear true. Today, repression has rid itself of the burden of any embarrassment, , and it is obvious to all that the mere dream of transgressing, the mere deviation of thought, is enough to attract the iron fist of the judicial system. An example? The busts that periodically snap the handcuffs onto someone who has downloaded images of "child pornography" from the Internet. Ho9wever contemptible, criticizable, hateful such behavior may be, the fact remains that these people are incriminated not for having abused any minors, but for looking at photographs in the privacy of their own homes. How long until the public burning of the works of Sade? Another example on the horizon is what happened to some friends of those arrested last February 12 in relation to the investigation of the so-called "new BR" (Red Brigades). Stopped by a police patrol in the very serious act of putting up posters, they were taken in for arrest. Already the event is telling in itself, since atmost, a poster can express an idea. Furthermore, the idea expressed in these posters wasn't

an incitement to armed struggle, but rather the leveling of the War on Terrorism. How long until the raids against anti-militarists and pacifists?

The individual, with her ideas, desires and impulses constitutes a threat for the social order, but also for himself and others. From this is born the climate of civil war that is spreading: nocturnal curfews, patrols by armed soldiers, roadblocks. It is as if war had been declared on an imaginary enemy, that isn't there, but that might be us. On everyone and no one. If each individual is a potential criminal and if every criminal is an enemy of the state, then a war against individuals is being carried out. Now there is a substantial difference between the concept of the criminal and the concept of the enemy. The former is recognized as part of the community. The latter is not. The enemy is not granted extenuating circumstances, his punishments are not negotiated. No pretense is made of wanting to rehabilitate her. She is destroyed. Against him, everything is allowed. Wars are police operations, and police operations are wars.

There is only one way to avoid being considered an internal enemy to eliminate. Respecting legality. But prayers to this modern idol don't protect you from dangers, except maybe that of divine wrath. In an atheist, however, a horrible doubt arises: Why should the law as such by synonymous with the good? Under nazism, the persecution of Jews was legal. The death penalty, torture as a means of extorting information, the manufacture of nuclear warheads, these are all legal in many states... The legality of an act merely denotes its conformity to what is prescribed by law, i.e., to the interests of the ruling class that is its author. It tells us nothing about the value, the meaning, the consequence of the act. The culture of legality thus leads exclusively to ignorance through obedience, which ceased to be a virtue many years ago even for priests (while continuing to be the sweet dream of tyrants).

And this isn't even the worst aspect. To catch a glimpse of the abysses toward which the exaltation of legality pushes, it is enough to ask a simple question: Why don't we cammit an act like, for example, rape? Do we reject it because we consider it a repugnant act, which goes against our ideas and feelings, or because there is an article in the legal code that prohibits and punishes it? In the first case, our motivation could be described as ethical. In the second, it is legal. Maintaining that human beings should follow state legality rather than their own individual ethic means declaring that it is impossible for an individual to establish what is right and wrong for himself. After the capitulation of free will in the face of the will of authority, the penal code becomes *the conscience of a world that no longer has conscience.* A world in which the human being is thought of as lacking intelligence, with dulled feelings, insensitive to suffering — a savage beast to cage, control, repress. It is the price to pay in order to keep ethics from rising up against legality.

A society that sees its members as its enemies and entrusts authority with the task of repressing their thoughts and actions, a society quick to sacrifice every freedom in exchange for a crumb of safety, a society that sees Good as obedience to the law and Bad as transgression of the law, can only end up becoming totalitarian. How else can you describe a society placed under a regime of probation by a state that is granted every weapon and every police method for dealing with every particle of a person's life? As Hannah Arendt maintained, even a democracy can be totalitarian. A totalitarian state is one that makes it a required civic duty not only to respect the law, but also to think what those laws require you to think. Put simply, the insurgents who broke bank windows in Genoa in 2001 were not the only criminals; those who "psychically participated" by not stopping or denouncing them are also criminals. This social order doesn't limit itself to repressing hostility against itself, but also indifference: loving it is a duty, and whoever doesn't carry it out is persecuted.

Unfortunately, there is a blind spot in our minds that keeps us from comparing the totalitarianism of the modern world to the kind that characterized the first half of the last century. As if the heaviness of what happened in the past certifies the lightness of what is happening in the present. As if the barbed wire that surrounded Auschwitz was of a different gauge than the wire that surrounds present-day concentration camps from Guantanamo to the Centers of Temporary Residence (CTPs). But anyone who doesn't stop in the face of the lack of gas chambers, who doesn't believe that the ruthless ness of a regime is determined by a particularly gruesome aspect, can't avoid grasping the similarity that exists between the two eras. It is enough to look around to notice the same banality of evil, and identical alienation of the individual, the same loss of the I through a combination of ideology and terror. Today a single model of life reigns from west to east, without being called into question from any side. This omnipresence is becoming its concern. As long as capitalism had an enemy, it also had a scapegoat on which to unload all responsibility (a thing that occurred reciprocally for the other). But now, who is there to blame if the world finds itself on the edge of an abyss?

The world at last affordable to all — a vast supermarket vomiting out plastic-coated goods — has not at all increased happiness, peace or equality. The enemy has now become anyone who protests against the world, i.e., potentially everyone. The ideology of safety anticipates the times. It doesn't wait for the explosion of rage. It attributes the terror of current social relationships to the freedom of individuals, suddenly transforming everyone into the enemy, making us all suspicious in the eyes of the other, isolating us in our fear, provoking a war among the poor in order to defuse a social war. And it takes the legislative and police measures necessary for repressing such a threat. In this sense, what some people call the safety drift can be thought of as a huge preventative couterinsurgency operation.

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