

Book Reviews

On Inhumanity: Dehumanization and How to Resist It.

By David Livingstone Smith.

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On the afternoon of January 27, 1945, 21-year-old Red Army major David Dushman drove his tank through the electrified wire fence of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. The Nazis had recently left, ejecting some 58,000 inmates and forcing them to embark on a deadly winter march. There Dushman and his fellow liberators found 600 unburied corpses of people who had been hurriedly shot earlier in the day, another 7,600 weak, emaciated individuals with little prospect for surviving, 370,000 men’s suits, 837,000 items of women’s clothing, seven tonnes of human hair, thousands of pairs of glasses and 44,000 pairs of shoes — all the property of the almost 1.5 million people murdered by the Nazis in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps (Agence France Press, 2021).

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), Steven Pinker argues that we are cognitively predisposed to believe that we live in violent times. Pinker maintains, however, that human beings have steadily become less violent, less inclined to engage in warfare and to commit the sorts of crimes whose results the young Major Dushman witnessed. And Pinker is not alone in believing that violent conflict has been in decline for quite some time.

In a critique of Pinker’s views and those who share them, John Gray (2015) debunks much of this controversial argument. Indeed, the hemoclysm of the twentieth century and continuing crimes against humanity in the first decades of the twenty-first century bear testimony to humankind’s record of persistent moral wrongdoing and sheer savagery. And yet it is quite easy to forget the calamitous events of modern human history. As Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion recognised, remembering is not a steady state but, rather, a frequent awakening out of forgetfulness (Clendinnen 1999, 181).

Remembrance days are an important means of contributing to such awakenings. For example, January 27 marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day. And the murder of 1-1.5 million Armenians during World War 1 by the Ottoman Turks — the Armenian Genocide — is commemorated three days earlier.

But it is not only remembrance days that contribute to our awakening about past episodes of simply terrible human behaviour. Other means include media reports of man-made disasters and the release of germane films,

documentaries, and books. These awakenings — whenever they occur and through whatever medium — tend to arouse at least two questions in the minds of many, including this writer, one to which often plausible, fathomable answers can be found and the other to which the proffered answers are much less so.

The first question is: What factors precipitated either the internecine violence or systematic violence directed against other groups or nations? The answer is typically sought through an examination by historians of the interplay between, and the salience of, political, economic, social, cultural, and religious factors during a particular epoch.

Efforts to answer the second question take us into the realm of the potentially unfathomable: How can we explain humans' capacity to actually engage in violent conflict and carry out the abominable acts of cruelty into which it too often descends? Seeking an answer to the latter question is especially confronting when one considers, for instance, that the Holocaust was conceived as a matter of considered public policy targeted on *all* members of a particular people (the Jews), socially sanctioned and implemented by a highly efficient bureaucracy and through a compelling fervour for killing on an unprecedented, industrial scale. And all this by people very much like ourselves.

Into the breach of this second question steps, most recently, David Livingstone Smith in his new book, *On Inhumanity: Dehumanization and How to Resist It* (2020). This small book (it is about 200 pages long and divided into 26 chapters), written by a highly accomplished wordsmith, packs quite a punch and serves as an awakening out of forgetfulness — and a rude one at that. The detailed case illustrations of dehumanisation that Smith provides (such as the barbaric torture and public lynchings of Blacks in the deep south of the US and the depraved atrocities committed by the Nazis and those involved in the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides) are deeply disturbing to read, many of his observations are quite counterintuitive and some of his conclusions are profoundly disconcerting.

Dehumanisation is one of the most frequently cited aetiological factors that seek to explain the onset and persistence of intergroup violence, especially genocidal violence and lesser atrocities. According to Smith, dehumanisation entails conceiving of others as subhuman creatures — as animals and perhaps even as vermin — and the first step on the road to dehumanisation is to divide humans into races. Consequently, Smith devotes several early chapters of his book to a discussion of race and racism.

Smith notes that people commonly think of race as something that is real and makes all members of a particular racial group the people that they are — that they share something inherent which is deep, unalterable and transmitted by descent. The theory of race, then, explains a phenomenon that is observed (e.g., particular behaviours putatively informed by certain values) by postulating the existence of something which is unobservable, namely, an

inherent, natural ‘racial essence’. While this analysis resonates strongly for many people, the problem with it, as Smith explains in Chapter 8, is that it has no scientific foundation. The idea, then, that there are human races is simply an illusion, albeit a very powerful one.

Despite the contemporary prominence of identity politics based on appearance, as illustrated by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, Smith underscores the fact that what makes a person socially constructed as a member of a particular race is not necessarily their appearance: People can pass as members of a (supposed) race other than their own. Rather, it is their inherent unchangeable essence. And persistent racist denigration gradually but ineluctably slips into dehumanisation when people are imagined to be not just inferior but also to have a subhuman essence that makes them not less human but, rather, less than human.

One of Smith’s many disturbing observations is that dehumanisation and the violence that it stokes are *not* the product of the dehumanisers’ moral disengagement from their victims, a disengagement which might loosen the gossamer-like net of moral scruples that would otherwise restrain them from carrying out extreme acts of violence. Rather, the dehumanisers’ violence is an expression of what Sacks refers to as ‘altruistic evil’ (Sacks 2015). As Smith, à la Sacks, counterintuitively points out in Chapter 13, dehumanisers are typically highly moralistic and often regard their atrocious behaviour not as morally wrong but as virtuous because it entails trying to rid the world of what they believe to be some terrible evil. Nevertheless, dehumanisation does serve to disinhibit humans’ worst impulses for violence, but it is not a mechanism of moral disengagement. This observation has implications for the prospects of resisting dehumanisation, a matter which we turn to below.

On Inhumanity builds upon a diverse body of work on dehumanisation from a number of disciplines. In Chapters 15 through 18 Smith explores the roles played by political ideology and politics. In Chapter 15 he notes that dehumanisation is an ideological belief that is a psychological response to political forces (101) while in Chapter 16 he observes that (in)humanness is a political status that is conferred by social and political forces (114). In Chapter 17 Smith offers an interesting analysis of dehumanising speech characterised by the recurrence of themes such as parasitism, criminality, hypersexuality, conspiracy and filth and the portrayal of the dehumanised as a homogenous mass in which individuality is effaced. In the next chapter (18), he describes some of the features of dehumanising propaganda and underscores its very powerful performative potential to unleash extreme violence animated by contagious irrational hate. The effectiveness of the propaganda machine headed by Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Germany’s Reich Minister of Propaganda from 1933 to 1945, immediately comes to mind as illustrative of Smith’s argument in this chapter.

In *On Inhumanity* Smith devotes Chapters 19 through 23 to a closer consideration of some of the themes that characterise dehumanising speech

and their performative expression. For example, Smith notes in Chapter 21 that dehumanised people may be described as filthy thereby ‘requiring’ that they be avoided either through segregation, expulsion or herded into ghettos, prisons or concentration camps. It is in these chapters that a sense of pessimism began to gradually seep into this writer’s consciousness concerning the prospects for preventing dehumanisation. This pessimism was precipitated by such comments as: ‘Reasoning and evidence are usually impotent once dehumanization gathers momentum’ (155) and ‘Propagandists [can] get us to accept dangerous ideas in defiance of what our senses tell us’ (162).

But before finally turning to preventing dehumanisation, Smith tackles the topic of cruelty. And here he makes a startling observation, namely, that dehumanisers *do*, in fact, recognise the humanity of their victims in the very act of humiliating, stigmatising, and cruelly and sadistically torturing them while *simultaneously* believing that they are less than human! Indeed, were they not recognised as human to some extent but seen simply as animals, there would be no point in inflicting harm upon them through, for instance, humiliation and stigmatisation.

Smith is not the first to tackle dehumanisation and its sequelae. Indeed, Smith himself is well published in this field. A previous book, *Less Than Human*, was published by St Martin’s Press in 2012 and, late in 2021, Harvard University Press was due to release his *Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization*. How does *On Inhumanity* fit into the extant body of cognate literature? While it is not possible to review this literature here, it is possible to make some select observations.

One of the disciplines that has invested heavily in examining dehumanisation and which Smith partly draws upon is psychology. Some of this psychological literature agrees with Smith and some does not. For example, with regard to cruelty, Mariot (2020) comes to a similar conclusion as Smith but, in contrast, he underscores the persistence of ‘emotional interference’ experienced by some dehumanisers. Mariot found that some of the perpetrators of mass, gratuitous violence directed against ‘subhumans’ that he studied recognised the distress of those destined to become their helpless victims, remained aware of the fundamental immorality of their acts, and/or were reluctant participants. And yet they killed nevertheless, and relentlessly so. What resonates about Mariot in particular is that, while he notes the explanations offered by renowned scholars such as Christopher Browning (2017) (absolution of responsibility by superiors, deference to authority, peer pressure to conform, etc.), he also acknowledges that he is unsure that he will ever really be able to fathom how such murderous behaviour is possible (114). In making this confession Mariot is not alone. Renowned historians such as Inga Clendinnen (1999) and Saul Friedlander (1997, 2007) similarly struggled to comprehend the Holocaust, as did many of its victims who experienced and survived its worst excesses.

Another contribution from psychology on a topic not addressed in *On Inhumanity* is made by Haslam (2006). Haslam proposes that dehumanisation is not confined to intergroup contexts, which is Smith’s focus, but is also an important phenomenon in interpersonal contexts. And in 2014, Haslam and Loughnan published a more nuanced model of dehumanisation than Smith’s. They distinguish between two senses of humanness (one based on delineating the attributes that differentiate humans from animals and the other understood in opposition to objects such as robots and automatons) and, in turn, two forms of dehumanisation (animalistic and mechanistic).

Smith points out early in his book that the main reason for studying dehumanisation is ‘to learn how to prevent or disable it’ (21). And yet the least satisfying part of his book is ‘Resisting’, the final chapter, in which he considers some of the prescriptions for preventing dehumanisation. It is in this chapter that the pessimism aroused in this writer by some of the content of earlier ones deepened still further. This is because the prescriptions suggested by Smith are few and there is also a surprising omission.

Until encountering *On Inhumanity*, this writer strongly held that wisdom plays a major role in fostering virtue — that an important means for preventing dehumanisation is education including, among other things, enhanced moral education and raising people’s consciousness about how manipulative propaganda can often smooth its path. But Smith does not directly address the role that education might play. This omission is, however, consistent with some of his earlier observations on the limits of rationality and knowledge in shaping human behaviour, such as the impotence of reasoning and evidence in constraining dehumanisation once in train and that dehumanisation does not entail moral disengagement. And even though Holocaust education, for example, has not prevented the spread of Holocaust denial and other forms of antisemitism, including its eliminationist variant, the implicit devaluation of the preventative role of education is nevertheless a disconcerting lacuna.

What does he recommend? Smith points, for example, to the importance of opposing our own dehumanisation impulse, supporting a free press and freedom of speech, and knowing the warning signs (the dehumanisation of a vulnerable racialised minority by the dominant social group which portrays itself as the victim of the minority). Others, too, have offered similarly important suggestions for preventing dehumanisation but, like Smith, they are few in number. For example, Haslam and Loughnan (2014) recommend humanising society’s subgroups through intergroup contact and promoting an overriding identity thereby underscoring similarities among groups and weakening the boundaries or perceived differences between them.

On Inhumanity takes the reader on a carefully considered, fascinating and, at times, harrowing intellectual journey through a wicked problem and the very wicked behaviours that can flow from it. Unlike some treatments of dehumanisation, it is built on a diverse body of work from several disciplines.

The limited means available to prevent dehumanisation indicates that further research is urgently required. Until dehumanisation is more readily and effectively tackled, human societies will have to continue to depend upon, in some measure, being periodically awakened out of forgetfulness. *On Inhumanity* is an important, highly recommended and accessible contribution to the means for doing so.

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