

CHAPTER TWO

Stereotypes of Persecution

I SHALL CONFINE my discussion to collective persecutions and their resonances. By collective persecutions I mean acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers such as the persecution of the Jews during the Black Death. By collective resonances of persecutions I mean acts of violence, such as witch-hunts, that are legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion. The distinction is not, however, essential. Political terrors, such as the French Revolution, often belong to both types. The persecutions in which we are interested generally take place in times of crisis, which weaken normal institutions and favor *mob* formation. Such spontaneous gatherings of people can exert a decisive influence on institutions that have been so weakened, and even replace them entirely.

These phenomena are not always produced by identical circumstances. Sometimes the cause is external, such as an epidemic, a severe drought, or a flood followed by famine. Sometimes the cause is internal—political disturbances, for example, or religious conflicts. Fortunately, we do not have to determine the actual cause. No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and “differences” that define cultural divisions. Descriptions of these events are all alike. Some of them, especially descriptions of the plague, are found in our greatest writers. We read them in Thucydides and Sophocles, in Lucretius, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Defoe, Thomas Mann, Antonin Artaud, and many others. Some of them are also written by individuals with no literary preten-

sions, and there is never any great difference. We should not be surprised since all the sources speak endlessly of the absence of difference, the lack of cultural differentiation, and the confusion that results. For example the Portuguese monk Fco de Santa Maria writes in 1697:

As soon as this violent and tempestuous spark is lit in a kingdom or a republic, magistrates are bewildered, people are terrified, the government thrown into disarray. Laws are no longer obeyed; business comes to a halt; families lose coherence, and the streets their lively atmosphere. Everything is reduced to extreme confusion. Everything goes to ruin. For everything is touched and overwhelmed by the weight and magnitude of such a horrible calamity. People regardless of position or wealth are drowning in mortal sadness. . . . Those who were burying others yesterday are themselves buried today. . . . No pity is shown to friends since every sign of pity is dangerous. . . .

All the laws of love and nature are drowned or forgotten in the midst of the horrors of such great confusion; children are suddenly separated from their parents, wives from their husbands, brothers and friends from each other. . . . Men lose their natural courage and, not knowing any longer what advice to follow, act like desperate blindmen, who encounter fear and contradictions at every step.¹

Institutional collapse obliterates or telescopes hierarchical and functional differences, so that everything has the same monotonous and monstrous aspect. The impression of difference in a society that is not in a state of crisis is the result of real diversity and also of a system of exchange that "differentiates" and therefore conceals the reciprocal elements it contains by its very culture and by the nature of the exchange. Marriages for example, or consumer goods, are not clearly perceived as exchanges. When a society breaks down, time sequences shorten. Not only is there an acceleration of the tempo of positive exchanges that continue only when absolutely indispensable, as in barter for example, but also the hostile or "negative" exchanges tend to increase. The reciprocity of negative rather than positive exchanges becomes foreshortened as it becomes more visible, as witnessed in the reciprocity of insults, blows, revenge, and neurotic symptoms. That is why traditional cultures shun a too immediate reciprocity.

Negative reciprocity, although it brings people into opposition with each other, tends to make their conduct uniform and is responsible for

1. Fco de Santa Maria, *Historia de sagradas congregações*. . . (Lisbon: M.L. Ferreyra, 1697); quoted by Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident*, p. 112.

the predominance of the *same*. Thus, paradoxically, it is both conflictual and solipsistic. This lack of differentiation corresponds to the reality of human relations, yet it remains mythic. In our own time we have had a similar experience which has become absolute because it is projected on the whole universe. The text quoted above highlights this process of creating uniformity through reciprocity: "Those who were burying others yesterday are themselves buried today. . . . No pity is shown to friends since every sign of pity is dangerous. . . . children are suddenly separated from their parents, wives from husbands, brother and friends from each other." The similarity of behavior creates confusion and a universal lack of difference: "People regardless of position or wealth are drowning in mortal sadness. . . . Everything is reduced to an extreme confusion."

The experience of great social crisis is scarcely affected by the diversity of their true causes. The result is great uniformity in the descriptions that relate to the uniformity itself. Guillaume de Machaut is no exception. He sees in the egotistical withdrawal into the self and in the series or reprisals that result—the paradox of reciprocal consequences—one of the main causes of the plague. We can then speak of a stereotype of crisis which is to be recognized, logically and chronologically, as the first stereotype of persecution. Culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated. Once this is understood it is easier to understand the coherence of the process of persecution and the sort of logic that links all the stereotypes of which it is composed.

Men feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture; they are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster but never look into the natural causes; the concept that they might affect those causes by learning more about them remains embryonic. Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes. After all, human relations disintegrate in the process and the subjects of those relations cannot be utterly innocent of this phenomenon. But, rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. The suspects are accused of a particular category of crimes.

Certain accusations are so characteristic of collective persecution that their very mention makes modern observers suspect violence in the

air. They look everywhere for other likely indications—other stereotypes of persecution—to confirm their suspicion. At first sight the accusations seem fairly diverse but their unity is easy to find. First there are violent crimes which choose as object those people whom it is most criminal to attack, either in the absolute sense or in reference to the individual committing the act: a king, a father, the symbol of supreme authority, and in biblical and modern societies the weakest and most defenseless, especially young children. Then there are sexual crimes: rape, incest, bestiality. The ones most frequently invoked transgress the taboos that are considered the strictest in the society in question. Finally there are religious crimes, such as profanation of the host. Here, too, it is the strictest taboos that are transgressed.

All these crimes seem to be fundamental. They attack the very foundation of cultural order, the family and the hierarchical differences without which there would be no social order. In the sphere of individual action they correspond to the global consequences of an epidemic of the plague or of any comparable disaster. It is not enough for the social bond to be loosened; it must be totally destroyed.

Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator. It bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body. If the wrongdoers, even the diabolical ones, are to succeed in destroying the community's distinctions, they must either attack the community directly, by striking at its heart or head, or else they must begin the destruction of difference within their own sphere by committing contagious crimes such as parricide and incest.

We need not take time to consider the ultimate causes of this belief, such as the unconscious desires described by psychoanalysts, or the Marxist concept of the secret will to oppress. There is no need to go that far. Our concern is more elementary; we are only interested in the mechanism of the accusation and in the interaction between representation and acts of persecution. They comprise a system, and, if knowledge of the cause is necessary to the understanding of the system, then the most immediate and obvious causes will suffice. The terror inspired in people by the eclipse of culture and the universal confusion of popular upris-

ings are signs of a community that is literally undifferentiated, deprived of all that distinguishes one person from another in time and space. As a result all are equally disordered in the same place and at the same time.

The crowd tends toward persecution since the natural causes of what troubles it and transforms it into a *turba* cannot interest it. The crowd by definition seeks action but cannot affect natural causes. It therefore looks for an accessible cause that will appease its appetite for violence. Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitors who undermine it. The crowd's act of becoming a crowd is the same as the obscure call to assemble or mobilize, in other words to become a *mob*. Actually this term comes from *mobile*, which is as distinct from the word *crowd* as the Latin *turba* is from *vulgus*. The word *mobilization* reminds us of a military operation, against an already identified enemy or one soon to be identified by the mobilization of the crowd.

All the stereotypes of accusation were made against the Jews and other scapegoats during the plague. But Guillaume de Machaut does not mention them. As we have seen, he accuses the Jews of poisoning the rivers. He dismisses the most improbable accusations, and his relative moderation can perhaps be explained by the fact that he is an "intellectual." His moderation may also have a more general significance linked to intellectual development at the end of the Middle Ages.

During this period belief in occult forces diminished. Later we shall ask why. The search for people to blame continues but it demands more rational crimes; it looks for a material, more substantial cause. This seems to me to be the reason for the frequent references to *poison*. The persecutors imagined such venomous concentrations of poison that even very small quantities would suffice to annihilate entire populations. Henceforth the clearly lightweight quality of magic as a cause is weighted down by materiality and therefore "scientific" logic. Chemistry takes over from purely demoniac influence.

The objective remains the same, however. The accusation of poisoning makes it possible to lay the responsibility for real disasters on people whose activities have not been really proven to be criminal. Thanks to poison, it is possible to be persuaded that a small group, or even a single individual, can harm the whole society without being discovered. Thus poison is both less mythical and just as mythical as

previous accusations or even the ordinary "evil eye" which is used to attribute almost any evil to almost any person. We should therefore recognize in the poisoning of drinking water a variation of a stereotypical accusation. The fact that these accusations are all juxtaposed in the witch trials is proof that they all respond to the same need. The suspects are always convicted of nocturnal participation in the famous *sabbat*. No alibi is possible since the physical presence of the accused is not necessary to establish proof. Participation in criminal assemblies can be purely spiritual.

The crimes and their preparation with which the *sabbat* is associated have a wealth of social repercussions. Among them can be found the abominations traditionally attributed to the Jews in Christian countries, and before them to the Christians in the Roman Empire. They always include ritual infanticide, religious profanation, incestuous relationships, and bestiality. Food poisoning as well as offenses against influential or prestigious citizens always play a significant role. Consequently, despite her personal insignificance, a witch is engaged in activities that can potentially affect the whole of society. This explains why the devil and his demons are not disdainful of such an alliance. I will say no more about stereotypical accusations. It is easy to recognize the crisis caused by the lack of differentiation as the second stereotype and its link to the first.

I turn now to the third stereotype. The crowd's choice of victims may be totally random; but it is not necessarily so. It is even possible that the crimes of which they are accused are real, but that sometimes the persecutors choose their victims because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed. The Jews are among those accused by Guillaume de Machaut of poisoning the rivers. Of all the indications he gives us this is for us the most valuable, the one that most reveals the distortion of persecution. Within the context of other imaginary and real stereotypes, we know that this stereotype must be real. In fact, in modern Western society Jews have frequently been persecuted.

Ethnic and religious minorities tend to polarize the majorities against themselves. In this we see one of the criteria by which victims are selected, which, though relative to the individual society, is transcultural in principle. There are very few societies that do not subject their minorities, all the poorly integrated or merely distinct groups, to certain

forms of discrimination and even persecution. In India the Moslems are persecuted, in Pakistan the Hindus. There are therefore universal signs for the selection of victims, and they constitute our third stereotype.

In addition to cultural and religious there are purely *physical* criteria. Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors. We need only look around or within to understand the universality. Even today people cannot control a momentary recoil from physical abnormality. The very word *abnormal*, like the word *plague* in the Middle Ages, is something of a taboo; it is both noble and cursed, *sacer* in all senses of the word. It is considered more fitting in English to replace it with the word *handicapped*. The "handicapped" are subject to discriminatory measures that make them victims, out of all proportion to the extent to which their presence disturbs the ease of social exchange. One of the great qualities of our society is that it now feels obliged to take measures for their benefit.

Disability belongs to a large group of banal signs of a victim, and among certain groups—in a boarding school for example—every individual who has difficulty adapting, someone from another country or state, an orphan, an only son, someone who is penniless, or even simply the latest arrival, is more or less interchangeable with a cripple. If the disability or deformity is real, it tends to polarize "primitive" people against the afflicted person. Similarly, if a group of people is used to choosing its victims from a certain social, ethnic, or religious category, it tends to attribute to them disabilities or deformities that would reinforce the polarization against the victim, were they real. This tendency is clearly observable in racist cartoons.

The abnormality need not only be physical. In any area of existence or behavior abnormality may function as the criterion for selecting those to be persecuted. For example there is such a thing as social abnormality; here the average defines the norm. The further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution. This is easy to see in relation to those at the bottom of the social ladder.

This is less obvious when we add another marginal group to the poor and outsiders—the marginal insider, the rich and powerful. The monarch and his court are often reminiscent of the *eye* of the hurricane. This double marginality is indicative of a social organization in turmoil. In normal times the rich and powerful enjoy all sorts of protection and privileges which the disinherited lack. We are concerned here not with normal circumstances but with periods of crisis. A mere glance at world

history will reveal that the odds of a violent death at the hands of a frenzied crowd are statistically greater for the privileged than for any other category. Extreme characteristics ultimately attract collective destruction at some time or other, extremes not just of wealth or poverty, but also of success and failure, beauty and ugliness, vice and virtue, the ability to please and to displease. The weakness of women, children, and old people, as well as the strength of the most powerful, becomes weakness in the face of the crowd. Crowds commonly turn on those who originally held exceptional power over them.

No doubt some people will be shocked to find the rich and powerful listed among the victims of collective persecution under the same title as the poor and weak. The two phenomena are not symmetrical in their eyes. The rich and powerful exert an influence over society which justifies the acts of violence to which they are subjected in times of crisis. This is the holy revolt of the oppressed.

The borderline between rational discrimination and arbitrary persecution is sometimes difficult to trace. For political, moral, and medical reasons certain forms of discrimination strike us as reasonable today, yet they are similar to the ancient forms of persecution; for example, the quarantine of anyone who might be contagious during an epidemic. In the Middle Ages doctors were hostile to the idea that the plague could spread through physical contact with the diseased. Generally, they belonged to the enlightened group and any theory of contagion smacked too much of a persecutor's prejudice not to be suspect. And yet these doctors were wrong. For the idea of contagion to become established in the nineteenth century in a purely medical context, devoid of any association with persecution, it was necessary for there to be no suspicion that it was the return of prejudice in a new disguise.

This is an interesting question but has nothing to do with our present work. My only goal is to enumerate the qualities that tend to polarize violent crowds against those who possess them. The examples I have given unquestionably belong in this category. The fact that some of these acts of violence might even be justifiable today is not really important to the line of analysis I am pursuing.

I am not seeking to set exact boundaries to the field of persecution; nor am I trying to determine precisely where injustice begins or ends. Contrary to what some think, I am not interested in defining what is good and bad in the social and cultural order. My only concern is to show that the pattern of collective violence crosses cultures and that its

broad contours are easily outlined. It is one thing to recognize the existence of this pattern, another to establish its relevance. In some cases this is difficult to determine, but the proof I am looking for is not affected by such difficulty. If a stereotype of persecution cannot be clearly recognized in a particular detail of a specific event, the solution does not rest only with this particular detail in an isolated context. We must determine whether or not the other stereotypes are present along with the detail in question.

Let us look at two examples. Most historians consider that the French monarchy bears some responsibility for the revolution in 1789. Does Marie Antoinette's execution therefore lie outside our pattern? The queen belongs to several familiar categories of victims of persecution; she is not only a queen but a foreigner. Her Austrian origin is mentioned repeatedly in the popular accusations against her. The court that condemns her is heavily influenced by the Paris mob. Our first stereotype can also be found; all the characteristics of the great crisis that provoke collective persecution are discernible in the French Revolution. To be sure historians are not in the habit of dealing with the details of the French Revolution as stereotypes of the one general pattern of persecution. I do not suggest that we should substitute this way of thinking in all our ideas about the French Revolution. Nonetheless it sheds interesting light on an accusation which is often passed over but which figures explicitly in the queen's trial, that of having committed incest with her son.²

Let's look at another example of a condemned person, someone who has actually committed the deed that brings down on him the crowd's violence: a black male who actually rapes a white female. The collective violence is no longer arbitrary in the most obvious sense of the term. It is actually sanctioning the deed it purports to sanction. Under such circumstances the distortions of persecution might be supposed to play no role and the existence of the stereotypes of persecution might no longer bear the significance I give it. Actually, these distortions of persecution are present and are not incompatible with the literal truth of the accusation. The persecutors' portrayal of the situation is irrational. It inverts the relationship between the global situation and the individual trans-

2. I am grateful to Jean-Claude Guillebaud for drawing my attention to this accusation of incest.

gression. If there is a causal or motivational link between the two levels, it can only move from the collective to the individual. The persecutor's mentality moves in the reverse direction. Instead of seeing in the microcosm a reflection or imitation of the global level, it seeks in the individual the origin and cause of all that is harmful. The responsibility of the victims suffers the same fantastic exaggeration whether it is real or not. As far as we are concerned there is very little difference between Marie Antoinette's situation and that of the persecuted black male.

WE HAVE SEEN the close relationship that exists between the first two stereotypes. In order to blame victims for the loss of distinctions resulting from the crisis, they are accused of crimes that eliminate distinctions. But in actuality they are identified as victims for persecution because they bear the signs of victims. What is the relationship of the third type to the first two stereotypes? At first sight the signs of a victim are purely differential. But cultural signs are equally so. There must therefore be two ways of being different, two types of differences.

No culture exists within which everyone does not feel "different" from others and does not consider such "differences" legitimate and necessary. Far from being radical and progressive, the current glorification of difference is merely the abstract expression of an outlook common to all cultures. There exists in every individual a tendency to think of himself not only as different from others but as extremely different, because every culture entertains this feeling of difference among the individuals who compose it.

The signs that indicate a victim's selection result not from the difference within the system but from the difference outside the system, the potential for the system to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all, to cease to exist as a system. This is easily seen in the case of physical disabilities. The human body is a system of anatomic differences. If a disability, even as the result of an accident, is disturbing, it is because it gives the impression of a disturbing dynamism. It seems to threaten the very system. Efforts to limit it are unsuccessful; it disturbs the differences that surround it. These in turn become monstrous, rush together, are compressed and blended together to the point of destruction. Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality.

The various kinds of victims seem predisposed to crimes that eliminate differences. Religious, ethnic, or national minorities are never actually reproached for their difference, but for not being as different as expected, and in the end for not differing at all. Foreigners are incapable of respecting "real" differences; they are lacking in culture or in taste, as the case may be. They have difficulty in perceiving exactly what is different. The *barbaros* is not the person who speaks a different language but the person who mixes the only truly significant distinctions, those of the Greek language. In all the vocabulary of tribal or national prejudices hatred is expressed, not for difference, but for its absence. It is not the other *nomos* that is seen in the other, but anomaly, nor is it another norm but abnormality; the disabled becomes deformed; the foreigner becomes the *apatride*. It is not good to be a cosmopolitan in Russia. Aliens imitate all the differences because they have none. The mechanisms of our ancestors are reproduced unconsciously, from generation to generation, and, it is important to recognize, often at a less lethal level than in the past. For instance today anti-Americanism pretends to "differ" from previous prejudices because it espouses all differences and rejects the uniquely American virus of uniformity.

We hear everywhere that "difference" is persecuted. This is the favorite statement of contemporary pluralism, and it can be somewhat misleading in the present context.

Even in the most closed cultures men believe they are free and open to the universal; their differential character makes the narrowest cultural fields seem inexhaustible from within. Anything that compromises this illusion terrifies us and stirs up the immemorial tendency to persecution. This tendency always takes the same direction, it is embodied by the same stereotypes and always responds to the same threat. Despite what is said around us persecutors are never obsessed by difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference.

Stereotypes of persecution cannot be dissociated, and remarkably most languages do not dissociate them. This is true of Latin and Greek, for example, and thus of French or English, which forces us constantly in our study of stereotypes to turn to words that are related: *crisis*, *crime*, *criteria*, *critique*, all share a common root in the Greek verb *krino*, which means not only to judge, distinguish, differentiate, but also to accuse and condemn a victim. Too much reliance should not be placed on etymology, nor do I reason from that basis. But the phenomenon is so

constant it deserves to be mentioned. It implies an as yet concealed relationship between collective persecutions and the culture as a whole. If such a relationship exists, it has never been explained by any linguist, philosopher, or politician.