THE DARK GLORY OF CRIMINALS
NOTES ON THE ICONIC IMAGINATION OF THE MULTITUDES[1]

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> "At any rate, a great number of problems change their aspects completely as soon as their connections with the sociology of religion are recognized".
> Emile Durkheim – Preface to *L'Année Sociologique*, Vol. I, 1899, page *v*.

When writing about the collective reaction to crime, Emile Durkheim postulated its social functionality and emphasized its negative and immoderate character. Punishment, Durkheim (1933, p. 85) says, is a passionate collective reaction that seeks to avenge the highest values of the group and, because of that, it recognizes no limits. Released to its own dynamics, it will be blind, and its destructive violence will stop only when the affective energy that animates it has been extinguished. Thus, in addition to the cohesive functions he attributes to penal punishment, three elements are significant in Durkheim's treatment of the collective response to criminal transgression: its affective nature, the repulsion it expresses, and its excessiveness. One may agree with this and yet immediately wonder: is this description complete? Does it not forget or misrecognize an aspect of the collective affectivity that, on this matter, is both opposite and complementary to repulsion? More specifically, is crime not both repulsive *and* attractive? Is the criminal not obscurely seductive?

Georges Bataille discussed these themes in relation to Gilles de Rais, a15th-century French nobleman who killed multiple children for his 'personal pleasure'. Bataille states that the feelings of horror and fascination this killer instilled in his contemporaries reached such a degree that he assumed the figure of a "sacred monster" (Bataille 1965, p.39).After de Rais's public execution, his name remained in the collective memory, assimilated to – or

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confused with – the terrible Bluebeard. De Rais became a legend which, retold from one generation to another, reverberated with the terror and the fascination that had made it come to life.

Let me quote another reference. *The Lives of Infamous Men* is a text that Michel Foucault (1994) wrote to prologue a book that was never published. In this text Foucault distances himself from the interest in great criminals (de Rais among them) because he considered their infamy to be a modality of fame. But, at the same time, Foucault acknowledges the intense and ambivalent feelings – laughter and shivering – he experienced when examining obscure crimes committed by unknown criminals. His intention was, he states, to provide an account of the lives and crimes of these men and women in a paradoxical way: rebuilding them analytically without allowing their intensity to escape. Nevertheless, he immediately recognized his failure. He did not possess, he says, the necessary talent to accomplish this undertaking successfully – and perhaps, we may add, nobody really does. For the same reason, Foucault claims that he would be satisfied with the publication, without gloss, of a collection of documents: *lettres de cachet,* incarceration orders, and hospital registers, which would transmit the violent existence of these wretched criminals as well as the reactions they raised or to which they were a pretext. These documents, Foucault says, have a fictional character. Or, rather, reality and fiction become mixed in them, creating the legend through which these infamous lives reach us, producing 'an odd effect, a mixture of beauty and fright' (Foucault1994, p. 239).

I would like to propose, however, that if the criminal is experienced as repulsive and attractive at once, this is true not only for French intellectuals with a visible sympathy towards marginality or *la bohème* (Bataille and Foucault, in this case). Even when repulsion is at first sight the only possible reaction for the 'average person', the opposite feeling never seems to be totally absent. Even though individuals respectful of the law deny this fascination, and think that their relation to violence – and violent people – is one of open rejection, we need only observe their cultural consumption to refute this claim. In mass media imagery, for instance, violence linked to murder and sexuality is a core element. By following a cathartic and edifying model, these narratives usually allow the fleeting identification of the spectator with the criminal to reaffirm finally the spectator's commitment to prohibitions. The importance of this consumption indicates the prestige that

violent transgression enjoys amongst individuals subject to juridical norms. Likewise, we can also recall the periodic and fervent adherence of ordinary people to the bloodiest wars, whether nationalist or civil.

Hence if the primary phenomenon is – as Durkheim pointed out – the reaction of great affective intensity that crime unleashes, this affectivity does not seem purely and simply repulsive. Instead, it is characterized by its ambivalence, as well as its mutability. That, at least, is one of the theses of this paper; theses which I would like to introduce as follows: 1) Criminal events unsettle individuals habitually subject to instrumental actions, identitarian thinking and positive law; 2) this unsettledness is affective as well as cognitive; 3)under certain conditions of communication, it can lead them to states of multitude; 4) this explains the excessiveness of collective responses to crime, as well as their ambivalence and the mutability; 5) this reaction authorizes us to qualify criminals – especially great criminals – as heterogeneous or 'sacred characters', and to affirm that 6) they are symbolic devices suitable to accomplish mythological functions related to the vicarious transgressions of common people.

Heterogeneous

Let us consider one of our criminals, preferably someone who escapes the presumption of a utilitarian motivation for his/her crime: the young student that stabbed his girlfriend a hundred and thirteen times, or the polite old woman that poisoned her guests tea; or any person without an apparent mental illness and proven to be capable of a violence literally unthinkable. These criminals induce a strange reaction from average citizens. There they are; they are apparently like anyone else. But only apparently; that is why they are feared. Something troubling is conjectured to be inside them, something that, in some way, is not themselves. An irregular force possesses them and makes them unpredictable and dangerous. They live outside the law; they do not obey the prohibitions that everyone else obeys. Above all, they may kill, because they already have done so; and they may do it at will, because they are humans. However, it is not sufficient to say that they lack scruples, because, in this case, they lack the very scruples which define humanness. It is not possible to decide. The violence of a wild beast is attributed to them, yet at the same time they must be punished as guilty persons. In any case, their type is not the common type. They embody

an indefinable figure created by the convergence of the most diverse features: the rage of animals, the evil of sinners, the courage of heroes and, sometimes, the brilliance of the genius. That is why they are treated as radically separate beings or even, it could be said, as taboo.

What happens is that mythical thought is far from constituting a folkloric rarity, an exclusive property of so-called primitive peoples, or a pathological phenomenon in contemporary societies. The criminal question is exemplary in this respect. From court sentences to mass-media broadcasts, from artistic expressions to informal conversations about the issue, it would be easy to find discursive testimonies of this 'archaic' mode of comprehending (and constructing) reality – as if criminal violence, and the reactions to which it gives rise, refuted the thesis of the final disenchantment of culture.

A central characteristic of this type of thinking is the refusal to establish a clear distinction between subject and object. Those who experience reality according to its terms are not guided, at that moment, by the logic of identity and the excluded third, but by the principle of participation as considered by Lévy Bruhl (1960) and later summarized by Bataille: think 'that a thing simultaneously is and is not, or that it can be what it is and something else at the same time' (Bataille 1986, p. 45). This principle involves the belief in forces imperceptible to the senses which are nevertheless at work. Participation sets itself as a connection between one reality likely to be empirically validated and another that can only be felt, or between two felt realities. In any case, participation is an experience in which the affective elements prevail over the cognitive ones. This does not necessarily mean that the objects experienced lack representation, but that the link between those representations – the nexus through which they communicate – is more affective than conceptual.

This is visible, for example, in the way that criminals are commonly portrayed: at once human and inhumane, or human and animal, or as free-will sinners and automatons of evil (or illness). It is also observable in the habitual linking of the series 'infraction-pathology-dangerousness-crime': the one who consumes illegal drugs is seen as an addict (which, of course, is not necessarily so), and being an addict makes him/her dangerous (an attribution impossible to demonstrate *a priori*), because his/her compulsive dependency – it will be said – may drive him/her to other kinds of transgression, such as robbery or even

homicide. Thomas de Quincey ridiculed such mythological series by inverting them: 'If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once begun upon this downward path, you never know where to stop'. (De Quincey 1889, p. 56).

If crime puts this peculiar reasoning at stake, it is because it appears as a *heterogeneous* event, 'completely Other' with respect to the societal (or *homogeneous*) ensemble[1].Homogeneous is a social space characterized by the commutability and commensurability of the elements (actions, relations and agents) that compose it, and the prevalence of identitarian thinking and institutionally regulated interaction. This societal structuration needs to exclude certain actions (or omissions) as criminal in order to configure itself, but it also needs to regulate the affective and representational economy of its subjects to reproduce this configuration. Then, in transgressing deep and irrational prohibitions that have a foundational value to this order, the criminal act produces a cognitive and affective commotion, putting individuals out of their regular modes of perception and comprehension. At that moment, the habitual cognitive structure (apprehensive about contradictions) tends to yield and go off-centre, giving place not to a formless vacuum but to the framework of mythical thinking: the crucible of the most fabulous images, figures, rumors and legends. It seems as if only the oneiric language of myth, in its condensations and displacements, its symbols and stereotypes, could correspond to the affective intensity unleashed by criminal violence.

But there is more: myth is capable of promoting a direct, non-institutionalized, relationship between collective emotions and beliefs and collective action. In other words, myths are capable of engendering multitudes, whether diffuse or concentrated. Heterogeneous criminal events put at stake precisely those (heterogeneous) modes of thinking, feeling and acting associated with this multitudinary sociability. Criminal events push individuals not only to the Other of their habitual affective and cognitive patterns, but also drive them to the others – and do so in a mimetic and fervent way. This fusional communication, detaching individuals out of their regular frameworks of action and relation, is usually productive of spontaneous social movements.

Causing disquiet, fear, anger and/or curiosity, crime generates a sort of social bond

that does not refer to instrumental and measured exchanges corresponding to socially structured roles and functions, but to non-regulated disseminations of intense desires and beliefs. In this condition of multitude, whoever thinks of crime and criminals does so mythically.[2] In the plasticity of its structure, the myth can grasp, and to a certain extent organize, these collective emotions, giving sense to the always recurrent and always unexpected experience of violence and death. In such effervescent states, feelings and thoughts are ambivalent, because for these 'out-of-joint' individuals it is not possible to fix their judgments and emotions antithetically. Moreover, it can be said that, in such states, the extremes come together: a fascinating terror or a terrorizing fascination arise. This is especially so when fusional communication converges in a single point; a singular figure who reflects and incarnates the phantasmic imagination of publics and crowds formed in this way.

This entire psycho-social dynamic, essential to understanding collective reactions to crime as well as the myth of the criminal and its functions in contemporary societies, is clearly discernible in moments of social crisis.[3]

Social Crises as Epistemological Advantage

It can be argued that a stable society is one with a central – and relatively organized – frame of reference which organizes everyday social behaviour, providing individuals with general elements to read their own social roles, positions and possibilities. It is an ensemble in which the central and marginal elements are clearly differentiated. By contrast, a critical state is a moment of brutal questioning of a particular society. It is an extreme juncture of implosion or explosion, characterized by a sudden change of speed in the time of that society and by a de-structuration of its symbolic space. As a critical period arises, the limits of social order become porous and elements of habitually differentiated and solid positions move and communicate rapidly. Society loses legibility for its inhabitants, as though the components were not in the place they were given in the known structure, and words no longer matched things. What used to be an established ensemble, a slow-motion association, becomes off-centre and vertiginously accelerated. The referential framework that allowed everyone to see society as a relatively organized whole and to localize their own place in that whole has been dislocated. This produces a general imbalance in the

habitual articulations of groups, whose members suffer a disorganization of their world and experience it as a growing abyss, a fatally dissolving process (if urgent and definitive measures are not taken). Deprived of their structural patterns, persons subject to law, property and routine feel their security affected. This tendency towards undifferentiation opens into an overt deployment of fear: the future, values and possessions seem to be threatened. One more step into that (lived) decomposition and individuals will believe that their life is in danger. Now the hallucinated images of chaos flow freely, and are as pressing as the desire for total order.

When that happens, the time for myth is prepared, and unleashed collective energy is available to be incarnated in a great individual, to convert him/her into a transcendent figure. A violent leader (restorer of absolute order) or the all-stalking enemy (personification of chaos) is ready to be born. And it is possible to say that the one born in this way is a mytho-historical individual: Caesar or the Messiah, Al Capone or Jack the Ripper–there is no difference here between reality and fiction. By appearing simultaneously or successively, these polarized doubles outline a system. On the one hand, they are the representatives of disintegration and impurity; on the other, the lords of order. And between these two poles, forming part of the system inaugurated by them, a phantasmagoric multitude can usually be found. *Les miserables* or the dangerous classes often have their own place in this imaginary composition as a latent and diffuse threat, always ready to pounce. Not only the great criminal or the bloody ruler, but the multitude too, often has been imagined as a wild animal: usually, like the former two, as a wolf.[4]

The critical situation is, to use Durkheim's (1995) notion, a period of collective effervescence. It is the moment in which common people find themselves shaken by the proliferation of intense affective and imaginative reactions. It is the moment when those who had belonged to the category of conformist tend to become politicized – or, at least, to participate in the whirlwind generated by a collective 'fable-teller function' more vigorous than usual. It is also the time of action. In crisis moments, notaries advance like Arabs – as Deleuze (1987, p. 404) would say – or the middle classes get ready for a revolution to regain order – as Monnerot (1969, p. 496) pointed out. It is when respectable neighbours massacre unfortunate marauders; when renowned criminals are chosen as police chiefs; or when marginal individuals, with neither occupation nor fixed address, become eminent

leaders proclaimed by respectable citizens. It is the moment when the pariah is crowned, not the viceroy or the bureaucrat: it is Louis Napoleon's time, as well as Hitler's or Mussolini's. It is a maddened moment that mingles people and situations which in periods of balance would have belonged to different worlds.

As these last examples suggest, along with this massive concentration of collective affectivity in one individual, the passage of this individual from the margins to the centre of symbolic space, and from institutionalized repulsion to collective attraction, can be considered characteristic features of multitudinary processes. The subject of this mutation from repulsion to attraction are the great number of established individuals thrown into a fusional communication by such crises; individuals that find themselves captives of an ambivalent effervescence that reaches its limit-point – and, in a certain sense, its definition and closure – in the designation of a Great Individual (that is to say, in the object of this passage). That is why Monnerot (1969, p. 437) could write that, in Hitler and Mussolini, a historical path that went 'from the asylum to the capitol' was drawn.[5]

The Criminal as Great Individual

In times of relative social and cultural stability, what is socially high and low, interior and exterior, attractive and repulsive, tends to be clear and distinct. These references, by remaining relatively defined and constant, configure a system that concurrently maintains social cohesion and reproduces existent hierarchies. The heuristic potential of critical periods resides in exposing the collective mechanisms and dynamics that produce those stable configurations. These periods unleash the forces and meanings upon which these configurations are founded and which usually rest latent and tied to the habitual functioning of order.

In the first place, critical periods reveal that the individual is a form produced by (and subject to) structural positions of societal order, and subject as well to secondary thinking and affective states corresponding to the regular development of that structuration. These periods also show that heterogeneous events can push individuals 'out of themselves'; that is to say, can lead them, through intense emotions and an overflow of imagination, into states of multitude.

Critical periods teach us that every great individual (either pure or impure, but always separate and 'transcendent') is one of the results of those states of multitude. And this is so because those individuals are the points where collective passions and phantoms become condensed, producing an eccentric and monumental figure. They are always imagined as exceptional characters, living out of the categorical frames of the tidy and regular world, bearers of extraordinary attributes and powers.

At the same time, crises have shown that in post-traditional societies the emotional concentrations that concur to produce a great individual have to take place in a more or less capricious, and yet democratic, way. Chance and merit must play a major role in the rise of the popular leader, illustrious criminal, or mass media idol. Aga Khan, Charles Manson, Marilyn Monroe: they came out of 'nothing', and their negative or positive reputation belongs only to them. What is at stake here is not a prestige derived from established statutes (hereditary king or untouchable Hindu), but a prestige of person. Great individuals appear as indeterminate existences, freed from societal bonds by a 'gift' that they possess. Nevertheless, if the 'substance' of their monumental individuation is a collective one, this prestige does not depend – or does not depend only – on their particular characteristics or skills. Those great men or women are, maybe more than anyone else, actors. And this is so even as their role depends neither on their will nor on an established institutional complex. Their prestigious script is fundamentally derived from the dynamics and the contents of the multitudinous affective imagination that designates and supports them. That is why they are sacred characters, the 'chosen ones'.

Crime is a major pathway to this type of individuation: that of the excessive and dazzling being. Such individuation, in this case, is certainly not correlative to the social ensemble of roles and fixed hierarchies but to the states of multitude that crime itself provokes. Since crime breaks the juridical rule in its capacity to establish regularity and to produce order, criminals will be seen, in varying degrees, as irregular and unconditioned. The growth and the opacity of their public figures will be in proportion to the importance of the prohibitions that they transgress and the way they do so. But, again, their success as great individuals depends more on 'fortune' – the randomness of collective affectivity – than on their personal 'merits'. Once a prohibited act is committed it is expected that, under certain conditions of visibility and communication, collective imagination does the rest.

Finally, the analyses of periods of profound social commotion allow us to state that the conditions for the emergence of a great criminal are analogous to those which make possible the charismatic leader. Notable consequences stem from this point. Let us mention one of them: the collective reaction to crime, heterogeneous towards positive law and its administration, is, conversely, isomorphic towards the processes of power formation. And once again critical periods, junctures in which those processes become 'personified', permit one to observe such relations (or, in any case, to formulate such hypotheses). They also allow us to postulate certain structural analogies between charismatic leaders and great criminals. Both rise from the nadir of the faceless multitude and, in a certain sense, incarnate it. Both are individuals of exception that concentrate and catalyze collective emotions to become exuberant figures, appearing to resist totally the order of rational arguments, the interchangeability of roles and the social contract. Yet, it is true; there are essential differences between them. The criminal's force is one that dissolves, whereas the leader's force is one that institutes. Leaders appear with a 'mission' of regenerating the social body from which they arise, and in which they intervene by fixing and transforming the collective energy, by producing the passage from repulsion to attraction, by operating the canalization of the states of multitude for the benefit of an actual or future order. In the multitudinous imagination the leader is a cure, while criminal is a poison. However, that does not prevent them from sharing genetic, formal and – as we will see – even substantive analogies. Both of them fall out of the established frames of the social group and are not inhibited by the law in force. They do not take part in the time of law, but in the time before the law was written. Both belong to the 'sacred hour' in which power is formed, a time that cancels or renews the very grounds of the societal order. Anything can be expected from them, and, willingly or not, everything is granted to them. A superhuman strength, will, intelligence and passion are – separately or in conjunction – attributed to them. They inhabit the space of the gods and the wild animals– that is, the space of sovereignty.[6]

The Criminal as Sovereign Individual (The Royal Function)

As mythical type, the sovereign individual possesses all the prerogatives of a subject that is never in the position of object, who is never an instrument or means. Those who are sovereigns act; they deny the given; they are always a cause, never an effect. They do not

accept any value different from their own *hic-et-nunc* will, and therefore they are not interchangeable with anything or anybody. At the limit, they do not accept any condition: they are unconditioned conditions. They play but they are not played. And, fundamentally, sovereign individuals do not work, they consume. They are, in short, imaginary doubles of the average individual: the individual who must obey others' rules, who is in the habit of avoiding violent pleasures, who spends moderately, who must return to work every day. That is why the position of the historical – or better, mytho-historical – sovereign individual is peculiar. Their consumption of wealth or life (their own or someone else's) becomes a consumption for others, one that must be conspicuous since what is at stake here is a social duty: the accomplishment of a mythological function that Bataille (1993, p. 248) calls the 'royal function'.

According to Bataille, the royal function of great individuals is related to the existing tension between a *restricted* and a *general* economy of the collective affectivity. The former refers to the affectivity involved in the functioning of the dominant socio-symbolic structure, the latter to the heterogeneous states active in individuals and groups. The first one connects the concepts of individual, reproduction and general equivalence – as well as those of knowledge, positive law and technique; the second articulates the notions of multitude, unproductive expenditure, the gift and the sacred – as well as myth, taboo and power. Intense affectivity is always excessive and potentially destructive from the point of view of the restricted economy and is, therefore, excluded from the world of labour and common sense. Nevertheless, there are paradoxical symbolic devices destined to deal with this excessive affectivity. These devices can be spatial, temporal, physical or human, but all of them have the specific function of producing certain types of communication between both economies. The model here is the feast, as Roger Caillois (1950) understands it: a time of expenditure and license opposed to the habitual time of appropriation and constrictions, but whose limitation and ritualization grant a purgative value favourable to the reproduction of social structure.

Sovereign individuals are a particular type of such symbolic devices. That is why Bataille (1993,p. 249) could write that the sovereign individual is to space what the feast is to time. It is a function of sovereign individuals to liberate the affective fluxes of the multitude and to reflect, in a cathartic and spectacular operation, the violence of feelings

and beliefs that remain diffuse, and even refused, in every 'small' individual. In acting and reacting at the edge of collective affectivity, the sovereign individual produces a contagious communication between these spectators: a crowd-like contagion that is deeper the more irrational it is. These spectators, in contemplating the exhibition of luxury, sexual disorder and/or the power of death, vicariously experience a detachment from the constrictive boredom of everyday life.

Bataille (1993, p.233) stated that sovereign individuals used to be fundamental devices in the socio-symbolical space of sacrificial and monarchic societies. But when the authority of the sacred or divine kings was eliminated and the religious feast became inoffensive, it might be said – by extending Bataille's thesis – that nowadays royal functions are fulfilled by some eminent members of the elites of wealth and power, together with the most popular celebrities of the society of the spectacle and the current 'decorative' monarchies. We should also add that if, in the multitudinous imagination, the sovereign is the one who lives beyond labour and juridical constrictions and is afraid of neither receiving nor conferring death, then the criminal seems to be particularly suitable to personify this mythical type in our societies. This is especially true of the criminal that has been recognized as such by the multitude. A characteristic bond with excessive waste, sexuality and violence is attributed to him (or to her). The accursed share of the subjects belongs to these transgressors: that is to say, all these feelings, images, thinking and acts have been produced as residue and monstrosity by the ensemble of science, work, morality and law.

If criminals shine and darkly seduce, it is because they personify the myth of an insubordinate existence; they offer the vision of a singular life, out of the functional alveolus and constrictive rules of the societal machine. Their glory is dire but it does not prevent it from being glory. They usually become negative celebrities, sharing the stage of notoriety with others inhabitants of the symbolic space of our societies. They are the savage, the sick and/or evil ones; the incarnation of formless nature; the leper or the pest; the dissolvent immorality. But at the same time, their acts and, in some cases, their ways of life seem to engender admiration and envy. They are the points of imputation of the non-recognized emotions and meanings that are alive, in some spectral way, in everybody else: foul love, unlimited egoism, bloody rebelliousness, enjoyed cruelty, and so on.

These criminals are inevitably imagined as chaotic, excessive and violent. Nevertheless, many of them are not strictly adapted to this mandate (or at least not totally, and not all the time). Apparently Al Capone was comparable, for his capacity for organization and his pace of work, to any mega-company manager (on the contrary, no company manager could equalize his capacity for violence and, as a result, his profile of archetypal gangster). Something similar seems to happen concerning the pleasure attributed to some 'dissipated' sexual experiences: when sexual transgression becomes routine, they tend to lose, for the one who enacts it, the characteristic dizziness of exception. However, it is clear that this is not the point here, since the transgression evoked in the violence of death or in the disorder of sex interests us because of its social function, for what it is capable of providing to the multitude of spectators that observe it, fascinated and repelled by its *mise en scène*.

Landru´s Case: The Blue Beard from Gambais

During the first decades of the 20th century, many Frenchmen might have had a similar appearance to Henri Désiré Landru during his public trial in Versailles's Criminal Chamber: a dark suit and tie, not very tall, bald head, thick beard. Only when he spoke did he become interesting. His baritone voice, his remarkable discursive eloquence, his slight sense of humor, his calm and disturbing responses, might have indicated that he was not like everybody else. Nevertheless, there were no physical features that suggested his violence, except perhaps for his very black eyes. Or was this excess of darkness a reflex of the thousands of gazes that found their own void in Landru´s image? It seems that Landru, with this appearance and these eyes, had murdered ten women in the space of five years. This triple play of contrasts – insipid appearance, magic voice, killer actions – helped to produce his disquieting prolife: that of a polite citizen, a tidy and scrupulous tradesman who hypnotized his victims (with his look, with his words) to satisfy his very low instincts and to take away their lives. Triviality, seduction and mortal violence were concentrated in his figure. However, all of this would have never been visible without a stage: his photographs and portraits accompanied by chronicles (fictions) of his life and crimes, reproduced in the thousands by the press.

Since its first apparition in a small sensationalist newspaper, his name knew only hyperbole. Almost immediately the headlines of *Le Figaro* claimed: ‘Landru, dit Barbe-Bleue’, subsequently echoed by the *New York Times*: ‘French Bluebeard’ (see Walz, 2000).

Landru was a major mass-media subject, and from the popular cafés to the exclusive salons, a continuous rumour reconstructed and enlarged his silhouette. Ultimately, the day his trial began, he was the king of French imagination. Nobles, diplomats, wealthy persons and other stable functionaries of the vicarious consumption of the multitude, formed long rows in the courthouse, exhibiting – as they had to – their jewels, overcoats and walking sticks. They were the select public who were present for the penal drama that Landru had wonderfully put in motion. They were waiting to see and listen to this new-comer to fame and luxury – an undoubtedly dark luxury: the one that wastes lives. Facing the Parisian elite that enjoyed a statutory prestige, he who had been a mediocre merchant now possessed a prestige of person. He had reached this summit by his own means. He deserved respect, and he obtained it: this cluster of notables would accompany him the whole trial. Each of the twenty-one days that the public process lasted they would be there, almost two thousand persons in a room prepared for three hundred. Landru, for his part, would not disappoint them; neither them – his socially acceptable counterparts– nor the common people who turned into a diffuse crowd temporarily constituted by his performance. Landru was a notable actor. He showed great concentration, self-control and eloquence in playing his role. But what was this role that he was being asked to play? Perhaps he was asked to support the ambiguity produced by the vision of a common man juxtaposed to the phantoms of rape and murder. Possibly he was also asked to incarnate the portrait of what an average Frenchman was and what he obscurely could be. In any case, he was being requested to collaborate in his coronation as one of the major criminals of the century.

Before the prosecutor, invoking God’s name, asked for his head, science occupied its official place. First, three psychiatrists affirmed that the accused was perfectly normal, his intelligence developed, his memory and oratorical capacity impressive. They affirmed that Landru was not suffering any mental disorder: neither psychosis, nor pathological obsessions, nor a state of confusion. He was not registering perversions, he did not drink or smoke, and his sexual appetites were most ordinary.

Later, another expert, a famous forensic doctor, presented a report in relation to his experiments with Landru’s stove: ‘It burns very well, especially the fats. It takes thirty-eight minutes to consume an empty head; a hundred minutes for a complete head with brain, eyes, hairs and tongue. To burn a foot requires forty-five minutes. The most difficult thing, gentlemen, are the intestines’(Pottecher 1981, p. 148).Towards the end, the doctor presented hundred and ninety-six grammes of human bones extracted from a hundred kilos of ash found near Landru´s house in Gambais.

Landru, for his part, gave the explanations that he could or that he wanted to, and he never recognized the crimes imputed to him. On 30 November 1921 his death sentence was pronounced to a full room.

One year after his execution, objects that had been used as evidence during the penal process were offered for auction. The public come out in multitudes again. The most valued piece, the most highly priced, was the small rusty stove.

The mythological heritage of the present

Whoever breaks a sacred rule becomes impure: religious thinking establishes this law. But even as subjects of secularization, we often believe it as well. And it is possible that criminals think in that way too. Because they are finally human, they cannot escape from being granted their social and personal identity at the hands of others. That is why they anoint themselves with the power that is attributed to them, and feel themselves stronger and less human than average. And they are, in a sense. They harden themselves if they believe, as others do, that their blemish is inexpiable. When this happens, all protagonists of the drama are communicated in a manner that might well be called mytho-historical.

It is true that for our juridical regulations there exists nothing but citizens (responsible subjects of rights).The one who violates a norm which preceded his/her action and defines it as prohibited is bureaucratically treated with penal measures previously established. So presented, the transgressor appears merely as an offender. His/her only real identity is juridical, and his/her only differential attribute is having committed an act forbidden by a rule in force. Yet, in certain conditions of visibility and communicability, an unlit collective dynamic becomes mobilized. On those occasions transgressors are anything but insipid offenders. If they used to belong to society, their forbidden act turns them into a

new type of being. Now they are *criminals*, and the figures of the wild, the mad or the evil, come to cover them and to expel them from their anodyne condition of citizen. It is as though their anti-juridical action had revealed a truth: if they are criminals, they are not like everyone else. And being seen as the Other of law, they also appear as the Other of society. That exteriority makes them opaque and powerful. Now they are radically strangers within the social body: repulsive and fascinating objects, capable of generating extreme feelings in average individuals.

The transgression of limits with foundational value for the societal order produces a cognitive and affective shock in its subjects. Subsequently, the source of their response goes from identitarian thinking and instrumental (re)action, distinctive of societal intersubjective relations, to another level: the one determined by the prevalence of intense affectivity and mythological syntaxes. Especially when it is related to sexuality and death, criminal events mobilize this heterogeneous economy, putting individuals out of themselves – or in processes, as Kristeva (1998) would say.

Criminal events produce, then, a mode of communication that does not correspond to socially structured roles and functions but rather to states of multitude. In these states (characteristic of crowds, but also of publics), desires, beliefs and narratives, usually hidden in the margins of societal spaces and the individual`s understanding, arise and are disseminated. Crime as pollution, social sickness, or declaration of war; criminals as powerful enemies, as the state of nature's savages, as evil incarnated or natural-born delinquents: wherever those figures and the syntaxes that sustain them can be found, it will be possible to postulate that a multitudinous mode of sociability is at work.

When real or supposed criminals turn into points of imputation of these states, they become attractive and repulsive at once. They function as attractors capable of catalyzing affective imagination up to the summit where the experience of contiguity (and even continuity) of habitually antithetical psychological and moral values can be verified. Touched by those multitudinary flows, transgressors acquire a monumental stature. When supported by collective forces they become ambiguous celebrities, sharing major positions with other inhabitants of the symbolic space of our societies. Then, as separate and even transcendent objects involved in a mysterious halo, these criminals are sociologically great individuals and mythologically sovereigns. If they enjoy this disquieting reputation it is

because they accomplish the odd social function of being the monstrous double of the individual subject to law.

No doubt it would be possible to elaborate a typology of great criminals on the basis of the collective beliefs and emotions that they personify and enact. And no doubt this typology would say much about the societies where these criminals arise and which they only partially contradict.

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[1] Heterogeneity is a notion that tries to give a name to the experiences of radical alterities from everyday life, experiences that cannot be named in terms of the habitual language that provides the categorical framework within which the event that will be perceived as heterogeneous occurs. According to Georges Bataille (1970), the experience of violence can be called heterogeneous – in opposition to the 'homogeneous' social world composed by technique, science, bureaucracy and the individual. He coined both notions (homogeneity and heterogeneity) in 1930s by critically making use of the concepts elaborated by Durkheim and *L'Année Sociologique* group to study archaic religions. To Bataille, the shocking experience of heterogeneity is analogous in secular societies to the experience of the sacred in traditional ones. For him and his colleagues at the *Collége de Sociologie* the fact that the sacred lacks its traditional historical expressions (religion and monarchy) does not mean that its syntax and its affective economy have disappeared. Rather, it means that it has freed itself from its old references and that it is available to acquire new forms, especially when a commotion in the profane day-to-day generates a shock intense enough to rouse its experience again. In their analysis of interwar European societies, Bataille, Caillois, Leiris and Monnerot showed that the feeling of the sacred and the symbolic thinking that corresponds to it reach vertiginous heights among generally disenchanted individuals. They showed that heterogeneity corresponds to the sacred, if not in the consciousness of those individuals, at least in their experiences and practices. That is why, in my opinion, Bataille's theoretical developments may be useful to investigate the current socio-psychological dynamic of collective beliefs and affectivity, and to affirm that important dimensions of the 'secular' criminal question can be explained in these terms. For the relationship between the *Collège* and the legacy of *L'Année Sociologique*, see Caillois (1949), as well as Richman (2002). For the major texts of the *Collège*, see Hollier (1988). For an elaboration of possible conceptual bonds between Durkheimian sociology and Bataille's critique of culture, see Alexander (2001).

[2]In fact, crime is a limit-notion of any socio-symbolic order, and the criminal is a mytho-historical figure *tout court* and not only in conditions of massive fear. By following the *Collège*'s theoretical framework, it is possible to state that crime and criminals can only be thought of mythically, whether in times of upheaval or regularity. In Bataille's terms, criminal violence does not belong to the societal space of economical, juridical and political positions, and it can only be grasped by a way of thinking that is also opposed to this space: 'the symbolic or mythical thinking, which Levy-Bruhl mistakenly called primitive' (Bataille1986,p. 46). Postulating a fundamental heterogeneity between violence and the world of labour and reason, only in mythical discourse does Bataille find the chance (including the sense of randomness this word evokes) to talk

about violence without covering it with radical ignorance, without making it reasonable. For him, the means of access to the 'truth' of criminal violence is not scientific discourse but the mythical (or better, poetical) word.

[3] To begin to understand collective reaction to crime, as well as the myth of the criminal and its functions in contemporary societies, the original articulation between Durkheimiam and Maussian sociology and psychoanalysis produced by Bataille seems to be a solid and stimulating point of departure. But to give a total account on this matter, this point of departure needs to be articulated with other references. To make Bataille's sociological approach fully contemporary it is necessary to complete it with a theory of the mass-media production and mediation of collective emotions, beliefs and representations. In this regard, among others references, Tarde's (1901) sociology of crowds and publics (available to the members of the *Collège*, but apparently neglected by them) could be useful, as well as some works of Baudrillard (1983; 2002)– in many ways dependent on Bataille's conceptions. This important subject was not developed in the present article. I limited myself to localizing the conceptual place of mass media in a very general manner by relating it to the notions of visibility and staging. Nevertheless, as I intended to show, central aspects of the contemporary criminal question, linked to general psychosocial dynamics in societies of spectacle, can be productively analyzed with the *Collège*'s conceptual tools.

[4] See Foucault (1999); Agamben (1998); Derrida (2009).

[5] René Girard (1985) wonderfully illustrates the inverse mutation of collective affectivity (from attraction to repulsion) by analyzing how Job, the biblical character, was the 'victim of his people'.

[6] See Bataille (1989). Georgio Agamben (1998) has developed this notion of sovereignty as mythological space, foundational of the social order, in the vein of Bataille's researches about the links between religion, political power and the myth of animality.

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