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The frightening borderlands of Enlightenment: The vampire problem

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ABSTRACT

Between 1724 and 1760, in the frontier area of the Habsburg empire waves of a hitherto unknown epidemic disease emerged: vampirism. In remote villages of southeastern Europe, cases of unusual deaths were reported. Corpses did not decay and, according to the villagers, corporeal ghosts were haunting their relatives and depriving them of their vital force. Death occurred by no later than three to four days. The colonial administration, alarmed by the threat of an epidemic illness, dispatched military officers and physicians to examine the occurrences. Soon several reports and newspaper articles circulated and made the untimely resurrection of the dead known to the perplexed public, Europe-wide. "Vampyrus Serviensis", the Serbian vampire, became an intensively discussed phenomenon within academe, and thereby gained factual standing. My paper depicts the geopolitical context of the vampire's origin within the Habsburg states. Secondly, it outlines the epistemological difficulties faced by observing physicians in the field. Thirdly, it delineates the scholarly debate on the apparent oxymoron of the living dead in the era of enlightened reason. Fourthly, the early history of vampirism shows that ghosts and encounters with the undead are not superstitious relics of a pre-modern past, or the Enlightenment's other, but intimate companions of Western modernity.

1. Introduction

'The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism.' This sentence is taken from Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 2). As a departure point for what follows, this simultaneously descriptive and programmatic yet ambivalent assertion seems appropriate. With the concept of animism, which first appeared in the nineteenth century, and which juxtaposes scientific modernity with a magical, pre-modern age, we are addressing a threat scenario in which a belief in spirits and their efficacy plays an important role, and where the David of scientific rationality takes on the Goliath of age-old human ignorance.

This figure of thought, originating in nineteenth-century optimism about progress, sharply opposes religion to science. Andrew D. White, pedagogue, author and co-founder of Cornell University, described the 'Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom' as a necessary precondition for the development of the natural sciences, and, in a very fundamental way, for a secular world picture (White, 1896). Both White's 'Warfare of Science' and Horkheimer and Adorno's 'extirpation of animism' are intimately linked to Western modernity and self-assurance over the significance of Enlightenment. The passage from the darkness of superstition into the light of reason has become a well-worn formula, one which requires virtually no explanation. The debate over the reality of bloodthirsty Undead illustrates this struggle in the most graphic manner, and without further ado we can add a new episode to the successful series 'Science Conquers Superstition'.

On closer inspection, however, we might experience some doubts about this version of events, especially given that the phenomenon of the 'Mystifying Enlightenment' cannot be underestimated (Summerfield, 2008). The 'dynamic of historical change may have been less dialectical than is generally supposed,' as David Lederer (2006, p. 3) has observed in his study on the origins of modern psychology and psychiatry in early modern Europe. It cannot be doubted that a remarkable shift did take place at the begin-

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ning of the eighteenth century. This was the moment when the distinction between 'natural, preternatural, and supernatural', instituted by Thomas of Aquinas and upheld by theologians and natural philosophers alike until the end of the seventeenth century, broke down. Up to then, the category of the 'preternatural' had included curious phenomena and objects which did not count as 'wonderful' in the strict sense. The term 'supernatural' was reserved for true wonders and signs from God. 'Marvelous facts and miraculous evidence' nevertheless increasingly disappear towards the end of the seventeenth century. Instead, the process of 'naturalisation of the preternatural', as Lorraine Daston shows, gathered pace (Daston, 1991, p. 100). Both sides were involved in this process. Theologians became more rational, and natural philosophers more theological, than had previously been the case. This is particularly evident in the realm of medicine, where bodily and spiritual health were closely connected to personal salvation by a moralising discourse. Nosology and etiology classified diseases under one of these two rubrics (Lederer, 2006, pp. 6–8). At the same time, however, there was friction between professional Enlighteners and professionalised Christianity, between empirical science and religious belief. Ever since the case of Galileo, the threat of charges of heresy had had to be reckoned with. The mind-body problem was particularly troublesome in this regard, as were questions concerning the nature of life and death (Lederer, 2006, p. 8).

The claim that the dead could come back to life was provocative for both sides. The vampire represents an epistemological void between life and death, between this side of the grave and the great beyond. This void—the explanation of the inexplicable—became a productive challenge for the European learned world, one which also touched on questions of responsibility for knowledge and of the monopoly over knowledge. Christian theologians had traditionally advised on the question of life after death, especially since the founder of their religion had himself returned from the grave and was the subject of particular reverence as a result. However, the credibility of their account had diminished in the face of a growing plurality of worlds and interpretations. Demonology, the scholarly science of spirits, which systematically described the agency of intermediate beings and messengers from the other side, had long been under fire from within its own ranks. The Devil himself, eternally responsible for everything (im)possible, had been suffering an identity crisis ever since it had become possible to deny the existence of Hell itself. What had until recently been a cherished double bill coupling the fear of hell with the promise of salvation was becoming ever more difficult to sustain. In the final quarter of the seventeenth century, the Devil's margin for manoeuvre was becoming ever smaller, and doubt was cast upon his ability to drive people insane. Human weakness took his place: deception and credulity now came to be incorporated into the domain of the preternatural, even if no-one challenged the fundamental fact of the Devil's existence.[1]

As it increased in authority, natural philosophy offered alternative interpretations of the world and of man. One of these was medicine, which more than any other science brandished the banner of a paradigm based on evidence, and in consequence embraced both rationalism and empiricism. In so doing, medicine promised to supply a valid answer to a question of general significance: at what point could a man be judged to be dead? Lastly, a further example will be discussed: the case of the army, which had the task of deflecting the vampire threat. Under its protection, and with bureaucratic thoroughness, expeditions were despatched to vampire-infected regions. Here, observations were collected, and minutes were taken and transmitted to the centre of power, where they were annotated and filed. Without the army, there would be no reliable vampire knowledge. Military and medical ambitions colluded and both, medicine and military, were subject to the spatial conditions and power dynamics of centre and periphery in the Habsburg empire.

The vampire with whom physicians, philosophers, theologians, and the army concerned themselves so intensively in the first half of the eighteenth century first saw the light of day in the age of Enlightenment, and since that time has never been successfully put to death. Some partial victories can be reported; after the first wave of anxiety and fear generated by his paradoxical existence and life-threatening intrusions, the vampire was scientifically dissected, disembodied, reclassified as a 'superstition' and finally reduced to a figure of fun. Prematurely, however: for after over a century of peaceful rest in his grave, the vampire woke again, this time in the form of a hollow-cheeked, melancholy aristocrat with needle-sharp canines. Ever since that time, he has tirelessly revisited the world of the living, fed by the power of the imagination wielded by a public of readers and cinema-goers with limitless appetites.[2]

This situation presents no small difficulty for historical research. When the discussion comes around to the topic of vampires, everybody already *knows* what is at stake. Even Voltaire knew who the real blood-suckers were: stockmarket speculators, merchants, and tax-collectors.[3] Karl Marx knew that capital was 'dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour' (Marx, 1867, p. 257). As psychoanalytically inspired literary theorists and folklorists know, a vampire is primarily a projection created by the death of a close relative (Dundes, 1998). At the very least, we can conclude from these examples that vampires are good to think with. It is not the purpose of this essay to explain why that is the case. However, the fact that the vampire has become a sociopolitical metaphor, a product of depth psychological symbolising, a figure of reflection and discussion, an aesthetic model or a pop culture symbol of an ubiquitous companion to modernity, cannot be explained without reference to the vampire's media career. This began in 1897 with Bram Stoker's Dracula, and was still producing new successes in the twentieth century, mostly in the cinema (see Butler, 2010; Miller, 2005). The vampire offered both a powerfully expressive narrative and a repertoire of images, apparently endlessly reusable and capable of producing affect. The modern vampire myth is a stable component of common knowledge, and it encapsulates knowledge about what a vampire definitely *cannot* be, namely an actually existing undead person: *mortuus non mordet*.

At the beginning of the vampire's career, none of this was so clearcut. Rather, it was the vagueness of knowledge about its ontological status that first made the vampire into a 'problem' and aroused fear from several perspectives. Above all, what was threatening was the absence of knowledge among enlightened scholars themselves. The effort to overcome this would lead to remarkable intellectual struggles.

2. Vampyrus Serviensis—a phenomenon of occupation

The story begins at the start of the eighteenth century, at a time before the vampire had even been invented, in the occupied regions of the Habsburg monarchy.[4] Klaus Hamberger (1992) and,

[1] See Daston (1991), pp. 117, 122.

[2] The literature on vampires is immense. The following is a representative selection with emphasis on publications in the German language, predominantly based on documents from the Habsburg cases (Schroeder, 1973; Hamberger, 1992; Sturm & Völker, 1994; Kreuter, 2001, 2001/02, 2002, 2005, 2006).

[3] Voltaire included an article on 'Vampires' in his 1764 *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Cf. Voltaire (1786), pp. 386–392.

[4] The work of Thomas Schürmann (1990) on the harmful dead in Central Europe is particularly helpful in summarising the older literature on the history of *Nachzehrer* and vampire representations. See also Barber's study (1988) on the folklore and reality of the Undead.