Reflecting on the Culture of the Encounter in the midst of war (José Casanova)

How can one write on the culture of the encounter in the midst of a criminal, destructive, “barbarian” (in the words of Pope Francis) war? When one of our own group, Constantin Sigov and his entire family, and many members of my wife’s family, and countless colleagues and friends all over Ukraine are exposed day and night to the unremittent shelling and bombing from the occupying Russian forces?

War, any war, is the utter denial of human encounter. But this war, in particular, is predicated on the refusal of imperial Russia to recognize the rights of Ukrainians to be themselves, to have their own name, their own language, their own religion, their own country, their own state, and their own aspiration to be a free, open, democratic, tolerant, multilingual, and multireligious society within Europe.

Given the purpose of our project, I want to emphasize the iniquitous role of the Russkii Mir (Russian world) ideology in the legitimation of the war as a “just war”, indeed as a “holy war.” The russkii mir is a religious-political ideology, a manichean political theology, concocted by the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, based on the mythical premise that there is an essential “Russian world” made up of the lands of medieval Kyiv-Rus (roughly Ukraine, Belarus and Western Russia), with one language (Russian), one faith and one Church (Russian Orthodox Church) and one czar (Putin). According to the Moscow Patriarchate, all of Ukraine is its canonical territory and therefore neither the so-called “uniatist” Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome, nor the “schismatic” Ukrainian Orthodox Church in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, nor any of the “heretic” reformed Protestant Christian churches in Ukraine have the right to exist in Ukraine.

Before one is ready to annihilate one’s own “little brothers” (“little Russians” in the language of 19th century imperial Russia) one needs to de-humanize them by attributing to them “evil” identities as “uniatists”, “schismatics”, “fascists”, “nazis”, thus the stated purpose of the war, according to Putin is the “de-nazification” of Ukraine.

I am spelling out in detail the process of de-humanization and religious-ideological justification that prepared the ground for the inhumanity of the war, not because I want to privilege the inhuman suffering brought unjustly upon the Ukrainian people, but rather because I want to emphasize its paradigmatic character.
The extreme form of dehumanization that underlies every war, allows and compels us to reflect upon the general dynamics of dehumanization that are intrinsic to every form of unjust domination, anywhere in the planet, wherever the dignity of the human person and the dignity and identities of human communities are violated.

Every form of domination, irrespective of its foundation in class, race, gender, colonial, civilizational, national or ecclesiastical supremacy, is based on the denial of the equal human dignity of the other person, of the other group, and thus in the failure of recognition of the other as a full human being, created in the image of God.

Every form of domination is a failure of recognition of the other. Every failure of recognition is a denial of the equal dignity of the other person with all its attributes and identities. Every denial of the identity of the other is a failure of the culture of the encounter.

It is true that the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people and their willingness to defend themselves, their country, their rights and their freedoms against an unjust war has provoked a remarkable and admirable outpouring of compassion and solidarity towards the victims, towards those exposed to humanitarian disaster in dozens of cities in Ukraine and towards the millions of refugees, who have been welcomed generously by most Western European countries.

But some commentators have noticed, rightly, the difference in the welcoming reception of Ukrainian (European) refugees and the not always so welcoming reception of non-European (Middle Eastern or African) refugees, by the same European countries. Indeed, human solidarity ought to be global human solidarity directed equally at every human being.

The question for us, is whether we turn this humanitarian disaster into a kairos moment that urges us to create new global structures of solidarity, which can be translated into institutional structures to address the global challenges of forced migration and refugees from all kinds of humanitarian disasters (wars, failed states and political oppression, climatic and natural disasters), of increasing economic inequality and precarious subsistence (the war in Ukraine, bread basket of Europe, is likely to lead to subsistence crises in large portions of the Middle East and Africa), of public health pandemics and of impending ecological disaster in many parts of the world. The war coming on top of the two-year old Covid-19 pandemic is a clarion call for all of us.
Finally, the war has made even more evident the crisis and the deficiencies in our unequal system of global governance. The UN system is in disarray and has no mechanisms to respond effectively when the country that happens to be presiding the UN Security Council, indeed when any of the superpowers with veto power in the security council, is the egregious violator of the UN Charter and of international law. The international tribunal in Den Haag also lacks the ability to bring to justice the big powers when they commit war crimes, genocide, or blatant violations of human rights.

This *kairos* moment will only be fruitful if we do not allow it to turn into “the world of Putin”, a world where might makes right; nor into a new global cold war dividing the developed democratic West and the Rest. (True, 141 countries voted in favor of the General Assembly resolution to condemn the unprovoked war of aggression; and only 4 sided with Russia and voted no; but 31 countries representing half of the global human population abstained, including not only the big powers of China and India, but also many countries of the global South in Asia, Africa and Latin America).

It is a unique world-historical moment that calls us to work towards a more equal and solidaristic, post-Western hegemonic system of global governance, based on consensually negotiated rules, which are internationally enforceable. Only the promotion of a true Culture of the Encounter could lead us all to work globally and in solidarity towards such a desirable outcome: a world order grounded, not on hard power-interest realism or utopian idealism, but on “normative realism,” that tries to protect the rights and dignity of every person towards liberty, equality and fraternity/sorority for all.