The child as totemic image in humanitarianism.
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The suffering child often comes to embody the central figure of liberal humanism, presented as the natural individual. The suffering child because it is innocent and free of ‘problematic’ subjectivities can easily become the totem for liberal humanist approaches to life that rest on an idea of universal humanity made up of equivalent individuals.

The innocence of the child becomes a proxy for naturalness, blamelessness and it becomes easier to invoke compassion and justice because the child is seen as separate from and free from the messy politics and contingency of the ‘adult’ world.

Children—often like women—are gendered feminine (women and children first, there are women and children here, won’t someone think of the children etc.) and the female world within histories of western political thought is a world without politics, it is the world of the home and the family, the world of objects not subjects.

In thinking through the child as the object, their silence, especially of the dead child that literally cannot speak, also means they can be objectified, they can come to mean what ‘we’ want them to mean. And what ‘we’ want them to mean says a lot about who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ see ourselves and not really very much at all about Aylan Kurdi or about a universal humanity. The child has no subjecthood and cannot speak for itself. The suffering child becomes the ‘silent spokesperson who just is’ with nothing more or less and thus a stand in for humanity in its simplest, purest and innocent form. The child as either the object of protection (won’t someone think of the children) or the site of projection obscures the wider context, specificity, responsibility and agency of those it is supposed to represent.

But of course it is not every suffering child that comes to represent all of humanity in this way. Only certain images gain traction and become totemic exactly because we are not capable of seeing humanity as equivalent individuals. The question is then why Aylan Kurdi? Is it the way he looks? Is it where he was found? Much was made of the fact he looked to be wearing his best clothes. Much was made of his shoes: ‘my child has similar shoes’ was an oft repeated phrase. Would the image have had the same traction if he looked less western? If we could have seen his face and given him an ‘identity’ that way?

But what does this focus on Aylan Kurdi or the totemic child do? It erases other forms of suffering. What about his mother? We know nothing of her. What about the other people on the boat who drowned? We know nothing about them? What about the people who lived and their suffering, their stories and struggles? Where is the concern for the living world, with its messiness and its people full of stories, agency and subjectivity? Through this production of the child as the innocent victim in need of help it becomes all too easy to ignore the people who are not so ‘natural’ or ‘innocent’ who are also searching for assistance and safety and to then make distinctions as to who is deserving of help and who is not which in turn challenges the liberal humanist ideal that we are all equivalent individuals.