Peace and its Enemies, Modernity and its Critics

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In his insightful dissection of the militaristic uses (mostly abuses, it turns out) of Heraclitus' famous dictum, that "War is the father of all and king of all," philosopher Bernhard H. F. Taureck compellingly summarizes his arguments against the long-standing, destructive efforts to present war as cosmically inevitable and ontologically foundational. This is done as part of the philosopher's admirable, career-long intellectual and civic advocacy of a peaceful world, and his opposition to the present state of things, which largely accepts the premise that war, or at the very least, fierce competition must forever remain features of human history and society.

In this rejoinder to Taureck's *Drei Wurzeln des Krieges*, my aim is to dwell on an aspect of militarism as it appears specifically in the modern world. In doing so, we will immediately encounter a seeming paradox at the heart of modernity: on the one hand, the era in which we are still living appears to confirm those who construe Heraclitus as an ontologizer of war. For while wars have been a perennial feature of human existence throughout recorded history, the modern era has witnessed "world wars" of such scale and devastation as to exceed the horrors of past ages, and indeed modern weaponry confronts humanity for the first time with the prospect of its complete annihilation.

And yet it would be misleading to view modernity simply as certifying the existential status of war. For in truth modernity is an unprecedented era also in another, and *contrary* sense: only in modernity, did the prospect become realistic of a world *without wars*. A historically new possibility was perceived by many as a genuine option on a not so distant horizon, namely the possibility that modernity might once and for all *eliminate war* from human existence. What in the past was a chiliastic dream of the end station of the human journey, when the peoples of the earth "will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, no longer will they learn how to make war," (*The book of Isaiah*, 2;4) now seemed to many as a condition tantalizingly within reach.

In his essay, Taureck points out that during the 19th and 20th centuries the voices of Nietzsche and the Italian futurists were heard "absolutizing" wars and calling for the eruption of military conflagrations. This is doubtlessly correct. And yet the fact is worth emphasizing that this was done *not* under the conviction that war is inevitable, but very much under the belief that war has become, precisely, *preventable*. The specific modern cult of war to which Nietzsche and his Italian disciple, Marinetti, have contributed, and which was taken over to a large extent by the fascists in both Italy and Germany, is not simply a prolongation of ancient motifs; it cannot be fully understood unless it is seen as a fundamentally *new* reaction against the unprecedented possibility that a universal and lasting peace will be instituted on the face of the earth.

And while many millions embraced this hope, reactionaries and conservatives, especially fascists, generally recoiled from it with horror. They agreed with the defenders of modernity that this new era signified the advance of peace, ushering in a realm of civility and equality, yet for them this was not a heartening prospect but a depressing and lamentable evolution. If the opening shot of political modernity was the Great French revolution of 1789, then it is not surprising to find its sworn opponents advancing a deeply pessimistic credo to discredit its expectations of universal fraternity and a peaceful existence. A telling example are the writings of Comte Joseph de Maistre, one of the most influential properly modern – or rather *anti*-modern – conservatives. In his fierce polemic against the revolution, de Maistre employed a mixed and contradictory array of arguments. On the one hand, he articulated a grim view of violence and war as divinely ordained, an ineradicable, trans-historical feature of human life and of nature as such:

> If you go back to the birth of nations, if you come down to our own day, if you examine peoples in all possible conditions from the state of barbarism to the most advanced civilization, you always find war. From this primary cause [...] the effusion of human blood has never ceased in the world.[1]

This was done in explicit rebuttal of the Enlightenment's belief in progress and the possibilities of peace. "There is nothing but violence in the universe," he averred, "but we are spoiled by a *modern* philosophy that tells us *all is good* [...]."[2] In this, de Maistre was clearly happy to fall back on

1 Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 27–28.
2 Ibid, p. 31. The emphasis on the word "modern" was added.

the presumably ancient claim that war is inevitable and violence ineradicable, even if his blatant views exceeded those of the ancients by emphasizing that they were *all there is*: "there is *nothing but* violence in the universe." This pessimistic excess, over and above the traditional positions, expressed the desire to counter the optimism of modernity, its belief in the chances of improvement and civilization. But, going still further, de Maistre in fact betrayed a realization that the project of modernity is not quite as impossible as he insisted, that peace might actually be an attainable goal. Here, the ontologizing of war tacitly gave way to the quite different and logically incompatible claim: peace, it was implied, *can* be achieved but will in fact mean a *retrogression*, not an advance. War was deemed culturally superior to peace:

> [T]he real *fruits* of human nature – the arts, sciences, great enterprises, lofty conceptions, manly virtues – are due specifically to the state of war. [...] In a word, we can say that blood is the manure of the plant we call *genius*. I wonder if those who say that *the arts are the friends of peace* really know what they are saying. [...] I see nothing less pacific than the centuries of Alexander and Pericles, of Augustus, of Leo X and Francis I, of Louis XIV and Queen Anne.[3]

Peace is thus not so much an *impossible* goal as it is an *unworthy* goal. And this was a specifically anti-modern inflection of the apologia of war, which was taken over as a standard ideological weapon by fascism. A more advanced counter-revolutionary thinker than de Maistre, Friedrich Nietzsche, who was arguably the most significant and instructive proto-fascist thinker, conducted a ferocious battle against modernity, which he saw as the culmination of a democratic and socialistic slave revolt and the subjugation of the traditional masters. Armed with the subversive "modern ideas," the ascending plebeian slaves represented peace and the retreating aristocratic masters the ethos of war. Nietzsche was protesting against that predicament already in an early piece, *The Greek State* (1871). There he expressed the concern that world peace, constructed on the basis of the ideas of "the French Enlightenment and Revolution," will render the masses unmanageable and lead inevitably to the collapse of a "war-like society" founded on "the broadest possible base: a slave-like bottom stratum."[4] He thus proposed to counter such pacifistic-democratic menace

3 Ibid, p. 29.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality,* Cambridge 2000, pp. 183–84.

with war. Notice how for Nietzsche, in consonance with de Maistre, peace is perfectly achievable but will be bought at the unbearable price of social levelling and cultural decline:

> I cannot help seeing, above all, the effects of the *fear of war* in the dominant movement of nationalities at the present time and in the simultaneous spread of universal suffrage […]. The only counter-measure to the threatened deflection of the state purpose toward money matters from this quarter is war and war again: […] if I view all social evils, including the inevitable decline of the arts, as either sprouting from that root or enmeshed with it: then you will just have to excuse me if I occasionally sing a pæan to war […]. So let it be said that war is as much a necessity for the state as the slave for society […].[5]

Counter-modernity thus contained a perhaps unparalleled campaign of an all-out war *waged on peace*. Peace as a reality, as a concept, and as an ideal – a looming possibility – was being attacked. In a striking reversal, peace was described as *deadening*; war was seen as *enlivening*. The utopia of a peaceful order was being re-written as a dystopia, most forcefully in Nietzsche's vision of the Last Human, "the most contemptible" human: "Nobody grows rich or poor anymore: both are too much of a burden. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both are too much of a burden. No herdsman and one herd."[6]

The Last Humans incarnate mass society. They epitomize the nightmare of social subversion, an egalitarian dystopia. But there is no hint of physical violence: if there is one thing the last humans are *not* it *is warriors*. They are the product of an essentially *peaceful* revolution, consisting of increased consumption and mass happiness – Zarathustra says that the Last Humans "still work, for work is entertainment. But they take care the entertainment does not exhaust them. […] They have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the night: but they respect health. 'We have discovered happiness,' say the Last Humans and blink."[7]

This prefigures one of the most notable fascist characteristics: an inversion of end and means. For most other regimes, war is a means to an end. For Carl von Clausewitz, paradigmatically, war is "the continuation of politics by other means." For fascism, by comparison, war is an end in itself,

5 Ibid.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Harmondsworth 1969, p. 46. Here and in the next citations I occasionally depart from Richard J. Hollingdale's translation, consulting the original German.

7 Ibid, p. 47.

valuable for its own sake, irrespective of its utilitarian logic, its expected benefits. "Fascism does not," Mussolini averred, "believe in the possibility or utility of perpetual peace." "War alone," he insisted, "keys all human energies to their maximum tension [...] Fascism carries this anti-pacifistic attitude into the life of the individual."[8] Or consider the following counter-modern avowal by Hitler:

> As a young scamp in my wild years, nothing had so grieved me as having been born at a time which obviously erected its Halls of Fame only to shop-keepers and government officials. [...] This development [...] was expected in time [...] to remodel the whole world into one big department store [...]. Even as a boy I was no "pacifist," and all attempts to educate me in this direction came to nothing.[9]

Given the imperative of war and the danger of peace, the fascist needed enemies to infuse meaning into life and, in case real enemies are lacking, he was obliged to create them. A very revealing illustration of this fact is the following passage by Martin Heidegger, written shortly after the installment of the Nazis in power:

> The enemy is one who poses an essential threat to the existence of the Volk and its members. [...] It may even appear that there is not an enemy at all. The root requirement is then to find the enemy, to bring him to light or even to *create* him, in order that there may be that standing up to the enemy, and *that existence not become stolid*.[10]

For our present purposes it is important to note how, for Heidegger, the enemy is there not just to threaten the Volk, but also to perform an indispensable redeeming task: to prevent existence from becoming dull and meaningless. The dictatorship of *das Man* must be averted, which is Heidegger's way of saying that the peace of the Last Humans must be blown up. The same is true when we turn to another paradigmatic case: Carl Schmitt's mythical friend-enemy dichotomy. Schmitt's ostensible aim was to objectively identify the core of the political as such, which he located in this opposition. But in reality, I argue, his goal was the same as Nietzsche's and Heidegger's, namely to impede the coming reign of the Last

8 Benito Mussolini, 'Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions,' *Modern European Civilization*, Num. 133–134, pp. 468–469.

9 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Boston, New York 1999, pp. 157–158.

10 Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe. Band 36/37. Sein und Wahrheit*, Frankfurt/M. 2001, p. 91. Emphases added.

Humans. He was so keen to emphasize that the friend-enemy dichotomy is something permanent, precisely because he was afraid that it might in fact be *transcended*, that peace might be attained: he worried that war would be superseded, and that class society would be abolished. And so he admonished his readers in his highly influential 1932 treatise, *The Concept of the Political*:

> If, in fact, all humanity and the entire world were to become a unified entity based exclusively on economics and on technically regulating traffic, then it still would not be more of a social entity than a social entity of tenants in a tenements house, customers purchasing gas from the same utility company, or passengers travelling on the same bus. An interest group concerned exclusively with economics or traffic [...] would know neither state nor kingdom nor empire, neither republic nor monarchy, neither aristocracy nor democracy, neither protection nor obedience, and would altogether lose its political character.[11]

This is a clear reformulation of what Zarathustra tells us when he warns against the Last Humans; and it is also very much an attempt to conceptually denigrate Marx's vision of a realm of freedom. And again, "the adversary," the enemy, becomes necessary to prevent the state from "withering away," as Marx and Engels had put it. Schmitt presented this as an impending tragedy, the elimination of political meaning from human life; but it was only so from the perspective of those profiting from the current hierarchical, exploitative and belligerent order. And he was also well aware of the fact that the masses were actually very interested in seeing this order superseded. As he wrote in 1929, in *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*:

> Great masses of industrialized peoples today still cling to a torpid religion of technicity because they, like all masses, seek radical results and believe subconsciously that the absolute depoliticization sought after for centuries can be found here and that universal peace begins here.[12]

The fight against peaceful modernity was taken on by numerous post-Second World War fascists and neo-Nazis. One prime example are the writings of possibly the most extreme of US American neo-Nazis, William Luther Pierce, whose notorious book *The Turner Diaries* (written under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald) has become the bible for the most ex-

11 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago, 2007, p. 57.
12 Ibid, p. 95.

tremist fringes of the American far-right. The book fictionally depicts a rebellion of American white supremacists which ends with the worldwide extermination of all blacks and Jews, replete with passages of utmost brutality and viciousness. Pierce's descriptions of the supposed racial enemies are so outlandish as to verge on lunacy, clearly bearing no relation to reality. But the author was not strictly speaking mad. In his way, he appears to have been an intelligent person, holder of a Ph.D. in physics who was employed as an assistant professor at Oregon State University from 1962 to 1965. The complete demonization of other races and their supporters was useful in that it justified Pierce's ultimate goals: total war, apocalypse and extermination. And this was very much intended to destroy American mass society, viscerally detested by Pierce. Like so many on the American far-right and today's alt-right he was an enthusiastic Nietzschean, so he wrote things like these against the Last Humans:

> If the freedom of the American people were the only thing at stake, the existence of the Organization would hardly be justified. Americans have lost their right to be free. [...] [The average White American] has become [...] a mass-man; a member of the great, brainwashed proletariat; a herd animal; a true democrat. [...] What the Organization began doing about six months ago is treating Americans realistically, for the first time-namely, like a herd of cattle. Since they are no longer capable of responding to an idealistic appeal, we began appealing to things they can understand: fear and hunger. We will take the food off their tables and empty their refrigerators.[13]

This is how the author approaches the great majority of his own, "white race." And at the end of the war he envisions, a huge percentage of all white Americans would have been killed, too. A racial war of Armageddon thus becomes a conduit to fighting, and getting rid of, the American average person, as imagined by Pierce. And much more recently, another white supremacist, Gregory Hood, wrote the following, in express polemics against the Last Humans:

> We know that this farce you call a country is a nightmare that just rolls on and on, and we want no part of it. We are not willing to die to make the world safe for garbage food, garbage culture, and garbage people, but we are willing to work and if need be fight for an organic society worthy of service and sacrifice.[14]

13 Andrew Macdonald, *The Turner Diaries*, 1978 (digitalized PDF file), p. 59.

14 Gregory Hood, *Waking Up from the American Dream*, San Francisco 2016, Kindle edition, location 303.

So one fights other races, in order to purify oneself. One requires the total enemy, the fabrication of a *demon*, to take down the *ignominious*. War, as Heidegger put it, even against a fabricated danger, is required in order to galvanize the people and prevent existence from becoming "stolid."

If the worldwide resurgence of fascism is to be stymied, and war averted, it would appear that modernity will have to be defended. And yet, such a desperately needed response on the part of opponents of fascism cannot, I think, be taken for granted. A whole tradition of left-wing thought positioned itself, on the contrary, against modernity, and proved quite disdainful of the masses: it would be easy at this point to compile a long and venerate list of illustrious left-Nietzscheans, indeed left-Heideggerians and left-Schmittians. This partial convergence reflects the fact that for many on the left, too, modernity is not lovable. It is seen as devoid of meaning and purpose; a depressing reality. The left, as a rule of thumb, does not particularly love the Last Humans, who are either denigrated outright, snubbed, preached to, or, at most, grudgingly tolerated. As Alain Badiou, the influential French philosopher and a radical left-wing author, once affirmed: "Man, the last man, the dead man, is what must be overcome for the sake of the overman."[15] And it is difficult to effectively defend what one does not love. Maybe we need to employ a discourse which emphasizes that the Last Humans are, in fact, lovable and therefore defensible?

This emphasis on love may seem out of place, an emotional appeal which has little to do with a cool-headed approach to political issues. Yet this might be an overhasty conclusion. Consider Georg Lukács, one of the greatest Marxist intellectuals in the 20th century – who is now vilified in his home country, Hungary, his archive being closed by the right-wing government. Lukács once posited the problem of great literature in strikingly emotional terms, which one would probably not expect in a Marxist literary critic. He wrote:

> The question grows essential and decisive only when we examine concretely the position taken up by the writer: *what does he love and what does he hate?* It is thus that we arrive at a deeper interpretation of the writer's true *Weltanschauung*, at the problem of the artistic value and fertility of the writer's world-view.[16]

15 Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Cambridge 2007, p. 168.

16 Georg Lukács, *Balzac und der französische Realismus*, Berlin 1953, p. 15. Emphasis added.

And for Lukács, the great realists of world literature like Balzac and Tolstoy were motivated precisely by their love for the common people, and their identification with their aspirations and sufferings. If modernity is to emerge victorious, it may need to be defended as lovable, as a mass project, a project of the Last Humans. At present this is not done passionately enough, or at all. Fascism is indeed hated, but what *the fascists hate* is not loved.

Let us look very briefly at one of the classical anathemas of left-wing cultural analysis: consumerism. Few tropes are more deeply ingrained in left-wing discourse than the complaint against the materialistic and hedonist frenzy unleashed by capitalism, resulting in the widespread conviction that socialist criticism must take a resolute stand against the insidious ethical, political, aesthetic, and environmental implications of consumerism. Such criticism appears oblivious of the fact that fascism and Nazism were themselves steeped in anti-consumerism. For fascists, the quest for pleasure and comfort by the masses was contemptible. We already cited Hitler's distaste for department stores, but we can cite Mussolini as well. "Here we are again," the Duce once stated, "at the core of fascist ideology. Recently, I was asked by a Finnish philosopher to convey the meaning of fascism in a single sentence. I wrote in German: We are against the comfortable life!"[17] Or consider the following critique of the way "the frantic circulation of capital" induces false new needs in the masses "so that consumption may increase":

> Modern civilization has pushed man onward; it has generated in him the need for an increasingly greater number of things; it has made him more and more insufficient to himself and powerless. Thus, every new invention and technological discovery, rather than a conquest, really represents a defeat and a new whiplash in an ever faster race blindly taking place within a system of conditionings that are increasingly serious and irreversible and that for the most part go unnoticed.[18]

Appearances to the contrary, this anti-consumerist lamentation was not written by Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, or Herbert Marcuse, but by Julius Evola, one of the most extreme far-right ideologues of the 20th century. This posture continues to characterize far-right ideology to the

17 Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, 34, Florence 1934, p. 134.
18 Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, Rochester 1995, 335–36.

present day. As Götz Kubitschek, a leading figure of the German *Neue Rechte*, explained to an American interviewer:

> You had only to go to the shopping center on a Saturday morning, [Kubitschek] once told me, and observe people in their "consumption temple" to see how there is "nothing at all there, spiritually." For Kubitschek and other New Right thinkers, [American-style materialism] is perhaps the most corrosive force eating away at the identity of the Volk, replacing a sense of "we" with individualism and profit-seeking self-interest.[19]

Here, it seems to me, Taureck's effort to conceptually transcend war has particularly great merit, when he stresses that a peaceful mindset might be anchored, precisely, in the everyday practices of the masses. "Might not that tension of expectation," he writes, "which billions of people invest in watching a peaceful football event, not also have a peace-generating effect?" This reads as a highly counter-intuitive proposition, against the backdrop of the standard complaints of left-wing critics, where competitive sports, indeed especially football, are usually associated with aggression and national chauvinism, *not* peace. What such interpretations tend to overlook, and Taureck perceptively underlines, is the way modern sports are a manifestation not simply or primarily of violent drives, but also of what sociologist Norbert Elias – a great defender of modernity – has termed "the civilizing process," a gradual, historical shift towards greater sublimation and regulation of violence, largely if imperfectly internalized by players and spectators alike.[20]

A defense of modernity, it is important to clarify, does not necessarily imply an affirmation of the capitalist order with its structural crises, enormous inequalities, ruthless profit extraction, and geopolitical tensions around control of production, energy sources and raw materials. On the contrary, one might argue that modernity as a normative and social project geared towards the greatest possible emancipation and equality is trapped within the straightjacket of capitalism and thus strives, sometimes consciously, sometimes instinctively, to break free of its limitations. And so, whenever capitalism is criticized, it is crucial to ask: from which perspective does it come under attack? Are its barbaric tendencies resisted, from

19 James Angelos, "The Prophet of Germany's New Right," *New York Times*, October 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/magazine/the-prophet-of-germanys-new-right.html.

20 See Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*, Dublin 1986.

exploitation all the way to the stirring up of armed conflicts? Or maybe what comes under attack are precisely, as none other than Karl Marx has put it, "the civilizing aspects of capital"? When the school-of-war attacks capitalism this is done in the latter sense, sometimes quite explicitly so. Remember again the way Nietzsche, in the passage cited above, took capitalism to task for *recoiling* from war: "The only counter-measure to the threatened deflection of the state purpose toward money matters from this quarter is war and war again." The same distinction between a reactionary and a progressive critique would generally apply to the matter of mass consumption under capitalism: surely, shopping is in many respects a depressing affair: the shopper is constrained, to begin with, by her lack of money, stringently limiting her options; she often feels manipulated, even cheated; and the inequalities in which consumption is embedded are a source of distress and remorse, too, busy shopping districts often displaying not only tempting goods, but also homeless people and beggars on the pavements, looking with despairing eyes at those who happen to be – momentarily at least – more fortunate than they. The shopper seeks a modicum of comfort and happiness, but knows that it is only his wherewithal that entitles him to a share of it, and being poor he will go to the wall.

For right-wing critics, however, it is not such poverty or inequality which is denounced: capitalism is attacked not for its deceptions but for its *very promises*, for making the masses believe that they are entitled to happiness and material well-being in the first place; and denigrated are not economic hierarchies and inequalities but the expansion of equality. It is useful again to recall how Nietzsche's Last Humans were seen as transcending class society and economic differences. The fact – presumed or predicted – that "Nobody grows rich or poor anymore," dismayed Zarathustra; and so was the decrease in hierarchy: "Who still wants to rule? Who obey?" he asked, with obvious consternation. Similarly, after the Second World War, Carl Schmitt could attack what he called "the happiness of pure consumption."[21] But far from seeing it as strictly capitalist, he emphasized, in a way typical of fascism, that this goal was common to *both* the capitalist West and the Communist East, in fact associating the utopia of mass consumerism with the likes of Engels and Lenin, and their affiliation with the global masses, *more* than he did with capitalism. "I consider it to be a utopia," he stated, "when Friedrich Engels promises us

21 Carl Schmitt, *Staat, Großraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916–1969*, Berlin 1995, p. 583.

that one day all power of men over men will cease, that there will be only unproblematic production and consumption, in which 'things regulate themselves.'"[22]

This statement encapsulates, it seems to me, the paradoxical opposition to modernity which has been the focus of this intervention. On the one hand, Schmitt seems here simply to echo, dutifully and soberly, the time-honored claims of ancient thinkers. As countless past masters have supposedly taught us, Heraclitus notable among them, we just cannot free ourselves of exploitation, mastery, hierarchy and, ultimately, war. All this amounts, quite simply, to "a utopia." Try as we might, we cannot break free of such vicious circle. And if all our efforts will be in vain, why the effort? But this is only the exoteric, superficial layer of Schmitt's argument. For esoterically, he claims something quite different: world peace, and the universal "happiness of pure consumption" which will undergird it are for him not a utopia, but a dystopia; they are possible, but disastrous. Behind the detached observer, diagnosing the impasses of human existence, hides a passionate militant against modernity. It is therefore up to modernity's defenders to be just as passionate.

22 Ibid, p. 577.