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The Collapse of the War System Some Developments in the Philosophy of Peace in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: *Developments in the Philosophy of Peace in the twentieth century have begun the process of demystifying the ideology of violence. This process has involved de-romanticising, de-rationalising, de-legitimising the culture of violence and the ideological basis of that culture. In effect (this paper argues that) the war system and the culture of violence on which it is based are on the point of collapse.*

The Meganarrative Approach

In any analysis of the forces that have dominated the twentieth century the ideology of violence may well seem, at first glance, to predominate over the philosophy of peace. The history of that century has seen some of the most destructive wars and conflicts ever recorded. The ideologies of violence on which these wars and conflicts were constructed have not gone away and the fundamental forces, which have created such enormous levels of violence, are even more dangerous today than ever before.

But on the other hand the twentieth century has also seen a significant evolution in the debate on the nature of war and peace and on the nature of violence and non-violence. Some of the greatest scientists and philosophers of that century have contributed to the evolution of this debate. Yet the questions, “why war?”¹ and more significantly, “why peace?” and the implications of these questions are still problematic for many people. But the possibility of human society transcending collective violence has become less of a Utopian dream and more of a practical necessity dictated by developments in science and technology, if not in ethics and morality. The practicality of individuals resolving con-

flict without the resort to violence and the possibilities of societies resolving conflict without the resort to war have begun to be critically and scientifically examined.² The practical application of the knowledge arising from this examination may not yet have resulted in any significant achievements in reducing levels of violence, but and this to me is key positive feature, those who advocate the functional nature of war and the utilitarian nature of violence are now on the defensive.

This paper sets out to show that the foundations for a philosophy of peace have been clearly laid and that the ideological basis of war and the utilitarian basis of violence have been critically undermined. No other century has seen such an onslaught on the philosophical and ideological basis of war and violence. This onslaught from so many different sides has eroded the very foundations on which war and violence have traditionally been rationalized, justified and normalized. The ancient institution of war, without losing its inherent fascination, has become substantially discredited. Many of the romantic myths about war and violence have been challenged and undermined. For decades the ideologies of the twentieth century had preached that successive wars, revolutions and the use of violence would be followed by social, political and economic bliss. The twentieth

century has shown more than any other century that the utopian belief in the power of violence is false.

“Before the Cathedral comes the vision of the Cathedral,” in this sense a philosophy of peace has been constructed in the twentieth century, which will have enormous positive influence on the twenty first century. The changes that have taken place in the critical analysis of the utility of war and violence, of aggression and conflict, will have far-reaching and fundamental effects on the future evolution of the science of human understanding.

The paper outlines the peace philosophies of four individuals and identifies their contribution to the evolution of a philosophy of peace. Firstly the moral foundation (to the philosophy of peace) and the contribution of Leo Tolstoy to that foundation. Secondly the political foundation and the contribution of Bertrand Russell to that foundation. Thirdly the spiritual foundation to the philosophy of peace and the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi. Fourthly the scientific foundation and the contribution of Albert Einstein to that foundation.

These individuals and their ideas are chosen partly on an arbitrary basis, but also because they are central to the evolution of the debate. The ideas put forward or adopted by them are central to the understanding of the philosophy of peace. In many ways these individuals and their ideas reflect almost the entire fabric of the contemporary and historical arguments and debate.

This paper is based around three propositions:

1. In relation to what I term the ideology of war: I start from the position that the ideology of war is a central part of the structural framework of our cultures of violence. Not necessarily the other way round; the horse comes before the cart. If we are going to dismantle our culture of violence we must first dismantle the war system.
2. So therefore the collapse of the war system is a vital step in the creation of the culture of peace.
3. The knowledge of peace involves almost every area of human and social systems. So the project of understanding peace is probably more complex than the project of mapping the human DNA sequence. So there is no one area of knowledge from which peace will arise.

All the information and knowledge that is required for us as individuals to live in peace and all the informa-

tion that is required for us to construct peaceful societies is well know and freely available. So the problem of peace is not so much the knowledge of peace but the problem is our failure to either recognise that knowledge or to act on that knowledge.

There is one definition of madness which I think sums up much of this approach: ‘To Keep doing the same thing and expect different results’

This paper tries to outline developments in what Conor Cruise O’Brien, an Irish author, called ‘The debate on the legitimacy of violence in the Theatre of Ideas’.

Which is a very nebulous concept. But we can start by saying the following:

Many of the arguments that surround the use of violence in the early part of the 21st century are the same arguments that can be clearly seen in the ‘Melian Dialogue’³ as set out in Thucydides history of the Spartan–Athenian war of the 5th century BC. The same problems in relation to how war and violence can be rationalised and justified was taken up by St. Augustine and who was writing almost one thousand years after Thucydides. More recently the philosophers of the Enlightenment set their minds to this question.

Augustine spelt out the concepts that are still the cornerstone of much of the debate today on the question of violence. I think the approach taken by Professor Hinsley in his ‘Power and the Pursuit of Peace’ is still very relevant when he says,

*Every scheme for the elimination of war that men have advocated since 1917 has been nothing but a copy or an elaboration of some seventeenth century programme—as the seventeenth-century programmes were copies of still earlier schemes. What is worse, those programmes are far more widely accepted as wisdom now than they were when they were first propagated. Nor is this the full extent of our stupidity.*⁴

The core of the argument is the following:

That the justifications and rationalizations that are generally (and normatively) used to legitimise some forms of violence and delegitimize other forms of violence that these justifications and rationalisations are false. Also the utilitarian arguments that are made for rationalizing violence in relation to its efficiency and the effectiveness of the use of violence in any conflict situation are false. Also the idea that no alternative or

substitute has yet been discovered for the use of violence is not supportable.

What are the implications of this approach? There are in my analysis a number of implications.

The first implication of this belief is the following, that no breakthrough in our understanding of violence will be possible unless and until we face up to these false justifications and false rationalizations.

The best example of this implication arises from the narratives we tell ourselves about war and violence. One of the most important examples surrounds the second world war. This matters because most of the justifications that are given by political leaders and their ideologists for the pursuit of the culture of violence in the second part of the 20th century and early part of the 21st century are based on these genuine but false beliefs in such simple mega-narratives.

Hannah Arendt took up some of these arguments in her short study *On Violence* when she asked the question: How obsolete is war?

On the very first page of the written text Arendt sets out the core of the problem as she sees it.

*The technical developments of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict.*⁵

Arendt, like most of her contemporaries, sets the framework for her debate within the European Enlightenment tradition. The very foundation stones of this tradition are set within the parameters of ‘rational analysis’ and ‘logical argument’. This is the paradox of violence that Arendt points out. For example the concept of ‘deterrence’ must be seen as the ‘Emperor with no Clothes’. She identifies what she calls the ‘obvious insanity of this position,’⁶ but she sees no simple answer or easy way out of the paradox. But this is the paradox that any general theory of violence must address or the theory itself is worse than useless. What she is asking is how is it possible to rationalize the irrational.

Arendt is not the first person to address this question but it is still a central question of the paradox. How can rational men and women adopt or support policies on nuclear extermination that should be seen as totally irrational. According to Arendt the logical flaws in the arguments that are used to support weapons of mass destruction of all sorts are so glaringly obvious that she is

amazed that people accept these arguments.

She believed that the scientific developments in the technology of destruction and extermination have exposed the irrationalities in the basic arguments of the just war theory and other theories for justifying and rationalizing violence. The question is how long will it take for this understanding to become effective in the affairs of man? Will war put an end to man before man can put an end to war? The jury is still out and the verdict may well be part of the sentence.

The Moral foundation: Leo Tolstoy, The Prophet of Peace

With amazing effrontery, all governments have always declared, and still go on declaring, that all the preparations for war, and even the very wars themselves, that they undertake, are necessary to preserve peace

It is not sinful to kill people when ordered to do so by the authorities, but that it is sinful to disobey the authorities

There can be only one permanent revolution - a moral one: the regeneration of the inner man.

We must take the Sermon on the Mount to be as much a law as the theorem of Pythagoras.

The law of love versus the law of violence: Leo Tolstoy predicted that war and violence and the absurdities associated with them would be abolished within one hundred years of the clear statement of the problem. It seems that it will take a little more than the one hundred years. But for very fundamental reasons the ideology of violence will not survive another hundred years. Because if we do not make that paradigm shift into a culture of peace there will be no culture in which a culture of violence will survive even in the short term.

There is one major problem with what Tolstoy is saying in relation to war and violence. If what Tolstoy is saying, if his analysis of how society works or what makes individuals act is correct, then almost everyone else is wrong right back to Plato and Aristotle. As Tolstoy is writing from a Christian perspective, he traces this “Perversion of Truth” as he calls it, right back to: “That scoundrel the Emperor Constantine”. Tolstoy believes that the very basic analysis of the traditional ap-

proach of rationalizing cause and effect are faulty, or as Tolstoy puts it “they are full of childish absurdities.” Tolstoy accepted that legal and reasonable excuses have been made for every form of violence, but he believed that no infallible standard has ever existed by which to measure or justify the worth of these excuses.

Tolstoy believed that what he calls, “The Law of Violence”, which has been a central part of the framework of the traditional analysis of the human condition is faulty and the actual law that makes human society work is what Tolstoy identifies as the “Law of Love”. As Tolstoy himself said: “We must take the sermon on the Mount to be as much a law as the theorem of Pythagoras”. He accepts that the: “Law of Violence” is so deeply ingrained in the modern world-view that it will be very hard to get people to see a different reality, which is the “Law of Love”. In relation to the “Law of Violence” Tolstoy asks: “how is it possible, for people endowed with reason and conscience to be deceived by arguments so manifestly irrational and directed by the self interest of the privileged few?” Tolstoy answers this question by saying that our very belief in reason has been deliberately undermined by the attempt to support the “Law of Violence” and this is where the real debate on war and peace and violence and non-violence should be studied.

For Tolstoy the key thing is not the that the message has been misunderstood but that the message has been deliberately perverted.

**The Political Foundation:
Bertrand Russell, Justice in War-Time**

The absurd assumption...that if one side is to blame, the other must be innocent.

In order to support this belief in the peculiar wickedness of the enemy, a whole mythology of falsehood grows up, partly through the deliberate action of newspapers and governments, but chiefly through the inherent myth-making tendencies of strong collective emotions.

All considerations of humanity and liberty were subordinated to the great game...and the patient populations, incited cynically by lies and claptrap, were driven on to the blind work of butchery.

They loved democracy because they hated Germany; but they thought they hated Germany because they loved democracy.

So long as hate and fear and pride are praised and encouraged, war can never become an impossibility.

The absurd assumption...that if one side is to blame, the other must be innocent.

Bertrand Russell recognised that people who supported war and the use of organized violence to resolve conflicts or who attempted to put forward rational arguments to justify the necessity of this or that war had many good reasons for their beliefs. What should any country do if threatened by an invasion from another? What if one country is threatened with economic blackmail by another? Many people believed that their way of life may be threatened by the ambitions of another group, and more importantly that the interest of two sides in a particular conflict are incompatible. Some people believed that some wars are colossal struggles between good and evil, in general the good being on your particular side and the evil on the other side.

Russell accepted that many of these arguments in favour of supporting war were not easily answered. These are the questions that arise whenever the arguments for and against war are debated. However, Russell felt that many of these arguments were standard arguments that could be used to support any and every war, and these particular arguments would not stand up to rational analysis.

Side by side, in the pages of Scientia, are to be read articles by learned men, all betraying shamelessly their national bias, all as incapable of justice as any cheap newspapers, all as full of special pleading and garbled history.⁷

In the end Russell believed that modern war could not be justified in any rational or scientific sense and it could not be justified in any philosophical sense

In 1916 Russell believed that he could, by the use of logic, identify certain factors that contributed towards the causes of war and the conditions for peace. He believed that wars were caused by x, y, and z factors and he set out to define these factors and their relationship with each other. In relation to the first world war

Russell believed that, whoever won, “the results would be disastrous to civilisation, probably for 100 years.” In 1956 Russell reaffirmed that he was unshaken in this belief:

*We owe to the first war and its aftermath Russian Communism, Italian Fascism and German Nazism. We owe to the first war the creation of a chaotic unstable world where there is every reason to fear that the Second World War was not the last.*⁸

The Spiritual Foundation: Mahatma Gandhi

I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills.

*Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.*¹¹

*We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of non-violence.*¹²

The method of violence gives no greater guarantee than that of non-violence. Millions sacrifice themselves in war without any guarantee that the world will be better as a result or even that the enemy will be defeated.

I have been practicing with scientific precision non-violence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of over 50 years. I have applied it in every walk of life domestic, institutional, economic and political. I know of no single case in which it has failed.

Gandhi’s philosophy: Gandhi did not write a *Das Capital* of non-violence, in the traditional sense of a systematic thesis setting forth his views on the world. He believed himself to be engaged in experiments out of which a blueprint for a philosophy of non-violence might be established.

One of the difficulties to understanding Gandhi is that,

*...he cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into any one of the convenient categories into which we divide people and ideas to make them more understandable; or into any of the numerous cultural traditions of thought and action which impose a quiltwork pattern on humanity.*⁹

*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*¹⁰ summed up much of Gandhi’s contribution to the future in one statement:

In the evolution of civilization, if it is to survive, all men cannot fail eventually to adopt Gandhi’s belief that the process of the mass application of force to resolve contentious issues is fundamentally not only wrong, but contains within itself the germs of self-destruction.

Ahimsa was, to Gandhi, a fundamental law of nature. If it was not, then he believed that the human race would have self-destructed at a very early stage. He looked forward to significant developments in the science of *ahimsa*, “in the field of non-violence.”

Gandhi believed that there could be identified in historical terms a progressive *ahimsa* and a diminishing *ahimsa*. He believed that “Man as animal is violent, but as Spirit is non-violent. The moment he awakes to the Spirit within he cannot remain violent.”¹³

The Scientific Foundation: Albert Einstein

The nation-state is no longer capable of adequately protecting its citizens, to increase the military strength of a nation no longer guarantees its security.

I am convinced we are dealing with a kind of epidemic of the mind. I cannot otherwise comprehend how men who are thoroughly decent in their personal conduct can adopt such utterly antithetical views on general affairs.

It would seem that men always need some idiotic fiction in the name of which they can hate one another. Once it was religion. Now it is the State.

One should not remain inactive in the face of such vital issues while those who are greedy and obsessed by power increasingly ravage the

face of the planet.

It is useless to proceed along this path, one cannot prepare for war and expect peace. There is no compromise possible between preparation for war, on the one hand and preparation of a world society based on law and order on the other.

The picture Einstein paints in relation to war and violence is all too familiar. The twentieth century has seen major breakthroughs within the area of natural and other science. Science and technology have contributed to unprecedented developments. On the other hand, the understanding of man and his relationship to violence and aggression does not yet seem to have made any significant breakthrough. Einstein believed that in any evolutionary process, a species must adapt to changes or risk its survival, and that in the same way, the developments in nuclear weapons will force the human species to evolve beyond the institution of war and beyond the cultural habit of violence.

In relation to his ideas on peace, Einstein can be seen as “the pacifist who encouraged men to arms and played a significant part in the birth of nuclear weapons.”¹⁴ It is more than ironical that Einstein, who had spent so much of his time in promoting peace and trying to critically erode the rational justifications for war, should have made such a significant contribution to the development of nuclear weapons. In 1946, Einstein set out some of his mature beliefs in a letter to the *Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists*:

Our world faces a crisis as yet unperceived by those possessing the power to make great decisions for good and evil. The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything—except our mode of thinking—and thus we drift towards catastrophe.

Einstein’s philosophy of peace can be traced along two distinct principles. Firstly, there must be considered his basic belief in people rather than institutions or organisations. Einstein believed above all else that people as individuals, rather than governments and other groups with vested interests, would seek peace rather than war. While this belief evolved and matured over time, Einstein’s belief in this basic principle never faltered. In this regard Einstein believed that intellectuals in particular, in various countries, could develop a solidarity which would force their respective governments and organisations to seek civilised solutions to the various conflicts that would arise from time to time.

Secondly, Einstein believed that where institutions were concerned, an institution like the League of Nations or the United Nations with strong legal authority, was the only possible way of guaranteeing international security. This security would be a vital component in bringing about peace in the chaos of international relations. Einstein believed that the League of Nations, or a similar organisation, must have a Court of International Arbitration which would have some form of compulsory power to enforce legitimate decisions.

Around these two basic principles it is possible to get a clearer picture of some of the deeper developments in Einstein’s philosophy of peace. Einstein stated quite clearly that his pacifism was not derived from any intellectual theory but was based on his deepest antipathy to every kind of cruelty and hatred.

It would seem that men always need some idiotic fiction in the name of which they can hate one another. Once it was religion. Now it is the State.¹⁵

Conclusion: The Crash Of Civilisation

It has always been problematic to argue, from a non-violent perspective, against the utilitarian effectiveness of war in political conflict or the efficiency of violence in social conflict. Because it is always easier to sow the seeds of doubt and fear than to sow the seeds of trust or tolerance. But we know that there are limits to the use and effectiveness of violence.

The greatest paradox that has been created by and resulted from the pursuit of the ideology of war has been the creation of insecurity rather than security on an unparalleled level. The modern war system created the incredible situation where the citizens of Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union were threatened with almost instant nuclear omnicide and the unimaginable consequences of such action. No demented suicidal ideologist could have created a more dangerous system than this. The war system whose very reason for existence was suppose to have been to improve the security of the actors involved created the very opposite of security. This situation did not arise accidentally or as a bolt out of the blue. From the very start of the nuclear arms race many of the scientists involved warned of the explicit dangers. The Russell-Einstein Manifesto (1955) published under the auspices of the Pugwash group of scientists was just one such warning. The real

question is how can such logical absurdities be passed off as rational analysis? We warn our children that if they play with fire they are sure to get burned. It is a simple lesson.

Towards the end of his life Sigmund Freud wrote very pessimistically about the future of civilization. In particular he was pessimistic about the future of European society. He painted the following picture. European culture with its two thousand years of Christianity, its hundreds of years of enlightenment, its scientific tradition, its education, its literature, its art, its philosophy was still a very violent and savage place. For him the First World War had shown just how thin the veneer of civilization really was—it was barely skin deep. He was shocked at how easy the men of learning in particular were in justifying and rationalising war and violence. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* He ended his analysis by saying that it would probably take another five hundred years of the gradual process of civilization to have any effect on our violent instincts and in reducing the levels of violence in European culture. His analysis might have been even more pessimistic if he had lived to see the savagery and brutality of the Second World War. Given the levels of violence in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century it would seem almost miraculous that a European Community has evolved against all the odds. But the European Community was not founded on any magical formulas. The principals which underlay the foundations of the community were not newly invented in the nineteen fifties they have been recognised by many philosophers and individuals down through the ages.

We know that no amount of violence could have achieved the type of change that was achieved in Europe by the power of peaceful change in the collapse of the cold war system.

Many people think that the world changed significantly after the attacks on United States of America in 2001. While the spectacular nature and the level of sophistication of the planning of these attacks had some novel features the attacks themselves were just more of the same on a long continuum of the ideology of violence which has almost run its course on the stage of history and will shortly be confined to the dustbin of history.

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Endnotes

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