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Making War Thinkable

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This paper identifies significant cognitive elements in Western thought which appear to undergird and lend an aura of legitimacy and credence to discussions of defense, armaments, and the preparation of war.

The prospect of war among the major nations of the world has become a mad man’s nightmare, an absurd solution solving everything, and nothing (Schell, 1982). In the event of nuclear war, there will be no victors or losers; all will be victims. If not all mankind, then all that is known as humanity is threatened with extinction. War and the preparation for war depletes nations’ economies and wastes the world’s resources.

Since war is a wild, suicidal absurdity, why do presumably sane human beings persist in planning, and threatening such an ultimate holocaust? What is it that continues to make nuclear war thinkable among both governmental leaders and those who willingly or passively support them? Erich Fromm (1955), has interpreted this kind of collective behavior as a form of insanity. Anthropologists have developed notions such as the territorial imperative (Lorenz, 1966). The most prominent political scientists call upon us to be realistic: the balance of terror is said to prevent the very horror it portends. Alternatively, political/economists offer explanations that are based upon reconceptualizations of the class struggle and the dynamics of modern corporate capitalism (O’Connor, 1973). Still others point to the attractiveness of the “game” of war (Fuller, 1984) or the pervasive power and dramatic seductions of the media (Parenti, 1986).

The purpose of this paper is neither to challenge nor to refute any of these explanations for the persistence of planful
threats to human survival. Rather, the aim is to identify several of the most significant cognitive elements in Western thought which appear to undergird and lend an aura of legitimacy and credence to discussions of defense, armaments, and the preparation of war. Three kinds of conceptualization, those related to wealth, to truth, and to power, appear to be central to making war thinkable. Each of these clusters of ideas are discussed separately.

This paper pursues its analysis of the war mentality without specific reference to important sociological, political, psychological, or other theories because its focus is less on behaviors than on ideas, and on the thinkability of war. The question is, what are some of the meanings which have been incorporated into our way of thinking which promote these dangerous behaviors? Theories of society and of human behavior can explain much, but they cannot fully explain themselves. That is why it is necessary to dig beneath them. Every theory begins with a set of culturally, historically, and politically based assumptions (Popper, 1972).

In focusing on assumptions underlying some of the most salient cognitive integers prevalent in the modern Western world the aim is to uncover ideological biases. It is an explicit assumption of the analytic approach which is here being undertaken that human beings act intentionally, with meaning and purpose. They do not simply behave mechanistically, like automatons responding to stimuli. Intentional action implies thoughtful action, in this case, the thoughts and ideas that make war and the preparation for war thinkable, creditable, and therefore possible.

Wealth—The Economics Paradigm

All economic goods are, by definition, scarce. When there is no scarcity, there is no possibility of economic thinking in the Western sense. Both the concept, and the empirical reality of a market economy are made possible by the assumption that the goods which are exchanged are desirable (needed or wanted) and in limited supply. Thus, markets have become institutionalized systems for the exchange of economic goods. Markets are expected to function best when each of the actors behaves in a
manner which maximizes his/her self interest.

As the major alternative (or supplement) to the market system in the West, scarce and desired goods may be allocated by a legitimate authority, such as a government, a social agency, or a taxing authority. But also under this alternative allocational system the fundamental assumptions of the dominant economics paradigm are usually maintained. Were there no scarcity, or no demand, the maintenance of both markets and allocational authorities would be redundant. Under both systems it is the cognitively and normatively established view that demand, i.e., the desire to consume in theoretically unlimited quantity, scarcity, and the promotion of self-interest are rational and inevitable. The hypothetical "economic man" (sic) behaves in accordance with these strictures.

It is commonplace to assert that unlimited demand is artificially promoted in late capitalist societies and that this consumerist orientation is being successfully exported to the elites of both the socialist and the developing world. Not as commonly accepted is the idea that scarcity, too, is a social construction, a product of planful economic policy and of ideology.

Within the sphere of pragmatic economic policy both governments and multinational corporations contrive a variety of ways to limit production or to withhold surpluses of, e.g., steel, oil, and agricultural products (Barnet, 1980; Moore-Lappe, 1979). Thus scarcities are planfully produced. In addition, and for purposes of this discussion more importantly, scarcity in tandem with unlimited demand is sustained as an ideology, a system of belief which is purported to promote hard work, productivity, a sense of self worth, and other such virtues. It serves as a justification for the persistence of poverty (there is not enough) and a rationale for hard work (the need to increase productivity). Even more important than the fact that scarcity induces the raising of prices and profits is its ideological significance. The belief in the reality of scarcity lends essential institutional support to the existing world economic hegemony and to the dominant agencies of political control and economic coercion, such as banks and commodity markets.

The suggestion that the notion of scarcity and unlimited demand might be abandoned might appear, at first glance, to be
a smug, middle class fantasy, one that has no place in the "real" world of poverty, hunger and oppression. But twentieth century poverty persists precisely because it is maintained by the economics paradigm that is here being challenged. It is a system that permits of the extremes of excessive wealth and abject poverty. Or to say it differently, the social problem might be viewed as one of excessive concentrations of wealth, rather than as one of poverty. Barry Commoner (1971) and other ecologists have been arguing for years that for the foreseeable future the earth possesses sufficient material resources so that no one need live in extreme want.

The focus on economic goods as the primary source of human welfare has had the effect of trivializing non-economic goods which are not similarly subject to scarcity (Carse, 1987). Freedom, love, creativity, knowledge, joy, the sense of purpose and well being are all in unlimited supply. They are beyond scarcity, beyond the constraints of the market and yet readily perceived to be among the most significant "goods" that build peace and promote human welfare (Schumacher, 1973). The ideology associated with the economics paradigm has tended not only to devalue these very human goods, but also in many instances to commoditize them. They have thus been made scarce, granted monetary value, and been subjected to the rules of the market. Health has become medicine, love is a new sports car, honor is purchased from a public relations firm, and security is represented by bigger and better armaments.

The perpetuation of scarcity and unlimited demand within the context of an excessively individualistic society (Bellah et al., 1986; Dallmayr, 1981; Bell, 1987) has produced what Thurow (1980) has aptly called, "the zero sum society". It is a society which tends to define human relationships in economic terms and thus promotes never ending competition for ostensibly scarce resources among individuals and nations. When property rights are elevated above all others (Helms, 1987), then war is made thinkable and easily justifiable in the effort to maintain, or to gain more economic wealth. It is not simply the existence of vast inequalities in wealth that invite violent conflict. Rather, it is the particular ideology which emphasizes, justifies, and legitimizes these inequalities that make war thinkable. For an unjust peace is but a respite between wars.
The Claims of Truth

The search for certain truth is as old as the most ancient religions. Claims to the discovery of truth have commonly been associated with assertions of superiority, if not invincibility. Truth is powerful, good, and virtuous.

Similar claims for truth have been made by Western empirical science since the middle of the sixteenth century. Over a period of four hundred years this truth and its prophets have laid claim, with ever increasing success, to a superior method of knowing. The idea has been nurtured that objective knowledge is available to humankind. A specific method for the attainment of such truth has been specified. Whereas for Aristotle (Metaphysics, 982a) the search for true knowledge was conceived as its own reward, with Francis Bacon the search for causes in nature took a new turn. Prediction and control of events became the goal of the new science and the dominant human interest (Habermas, 1971). Especially since the nineteenth, and the first part of the twentieth century, advance of this meaning of truth was associated in the popular mind with normatively valued progress.

There is no need to dwell here on the significant contributions of modern science and derivative technologies to human betterment, on the one hand, and to warfare on the other. That is not our issue. Rather, our concern is with the singular claims of empirical science as the only truth, or the only path to truth. Such a claim, if supported, has profound political implications: it authorizes those who know, to dominate over nature, as well as over all those who are condemned to ignorance. (Historically, this has been known as the distinction between the saved and the damned). The truth of modern empirical science which is concerned primarily with the observable, measurable and functional excludes and denigrates knowledge of the aesthetic, the moral and the transcendental (Friedmann, 1979). A system of knowledge which emphasizes doing over being and controlling over understanding is one that tends to denude the world of its enchantment and substantially robs it of its meaningfulness (Moscivici, 1977). An approach to truth seeking which is oriented toward the maximization of control is likely to be resisted by persons who are thus controlled, made the passive objects of another's knowledge, and expected to behave normatively in
accordance with rules that are not of their own making.

These, and other criticisms of Western empirical science, especially of social science, have gained an ever greater foothold among philosophers of science during the past half century. Much like any and all other ways of knowing, the Western scientific enterprise is understood to be politically, culturally, and ideologically bound to the status quo (Peller, 1987; Raskin and Bernstein 1987; Bernstein, 1978; Capra, 1982). Not unsurprisingly, it is seen as an ideology primarily protective of existing political and social arrangements.

The most important criticism of modern scientism with respect to the issue of making war thinkable is its principled refusal to take into account the moral consequences of its claimed truths. The segmentation of modern consciousness into the separate realms of reason and emotion, or thought and feeling (Berger and Kellner, 1973) has led to the separation of knowledge from wisdom. The myth of an objective, value free modern science is thereby secured. In the physical sciences this segmented mentality has made possible rational thought about what might otherwise be considered totally irrational means and ends. In the social sciences it makes possible thinking about human persons as depersonalized subjects. At times of social conflict they are conceived variously (but always anonymously) as victims, enemies, or body counts. It has led to what Hannah Arendt (1962) called, the banality of evil, for it disvalues the kind of reflexive and ideographic knowledge of self and others which enables human beings to humanize each other. Dialogue and mutual understanding have thus been undermined as essential building blocks of knowledge and truth. Human conflict can be readily justified by an ideology which presumptuously invalidates the truth of the other, perhaps even before it has been heard.

Power and Authority

Despite the rhetoric of equality in both the capitalist and the socialist West, the dominant social institutions in both societies are invariably characterized by bureaucratically structured hierarchies. Some persons and institutions are thus conceived as being legitimately more powerful than others. They have au-
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authority which derives from the passive or active societal consensus. Authority, defined as legitimate power, permits of the control of the behavior of others, even if it is against their will. Authority is built upon images of strength, suggests Richard Sennett (1980). It derives from a quest for images that are solid, guaranteed, and stable. As a consequence, it constitutes a source of both security, and of threat.

Power and authority are enhanced by wealth and by claims to specialized knowledge. But more basic than these two sources of strength, is the complex pattern of sentiments and emotions that grant legitimacy, especially to governments. People have been taught to stand in awe of the actual or potential exercise of great power. Power is good, is masculine, is invigorating, and its maximization is a constantly desired goal. Even as we protest against great power, we appear to admire it (Sennett, 1980). By contrast, to be weak is to experience social contempt. In the competition for power, the best are alleged to rise to the top; by inference, the least worthy remain at the bottom. This kind of a "rational" hierarchy is expected to promote competence, produce collective prosperity, and guarantee social order. (That it at the same time produces failure and the sense among individuals that they are inadequate is a less proudly recognized consequence).

No doubt, some important psychic gains may be claimed for the maintenance of traditional power structures (Fromm, 1952). But that is only one side of the issue. The exercise of power, especially the power of governments, is easily associated with the threat or the actual use of physical violence. Claims for the legitimacy of such violence are based on a variety of rhetorical propositions: patriotism, justice, security, solidarity, dignity, and ironically, peace.

War, and in its most extreme form, atomic war, is an exercise of the power of the state wherein its legitimacy and its virtue are tested to the limit. Governments can be viewed as those institutions that have been permitted to arrogate unto themselves the ultimate authority to use violence for allegedly legitimate ends, as for example, in inflicting capital punishment, or by declaring war. But the images upon which such exercise of violence are built are tenuous. The capacity to make war relies
not only on the rhetorical justification of the cause, but also on
the maintenance of received ideas of power, its virtue and good-
ness (Sharp, 1973).

Governments are unlikely to institutionalize the promotion
of peace because such action requires the unlikely voluntary
abrogation of their own power. Peace, especially a peace which
is greater than the absence of war, can therefore only come from
the bottom up, from people who delegitimize the use of physical
violence as a form of state power. It is not that they must con-
demn all use of power, rather that they need lay claim to a new
understanding of it, one that is other than coercive, controlling,
and ultimately violent.

There is a variety of paths toward the development of a new
understanding of power. It is possible to structure minimally
hierarchical institutions, and to reduce presently large differ-
entials in rewards between those who are at the bottom and
those who are at the top. Most uses of physical force as a method
of social control could be delegitimized, beginning with the
family and moving beyond to the larger society. Non-violent
resistance to what is viewed as illegitimate use of authority has
been effective more frequently than is generally recognized
(Sharp, 1973). Decentralization and the general down sizing of
human organizations holds important promise for the reduction
of depersonalization in the exercise of power (McRobie, 1981).
Most crucial, however, is the need to think critically about the
meaning of power and authority itself. Human differences in
capacity and ability are real. How can these differences be ac-
counted for so as to emphasize the essential core of human
equality? Rather than power which controls, a new understand-
ing of power might be one that nurtures, one that liberates the
less powerful from domination. The primary goal of such a lib-
eration would not be limited to the expansion of individual
rights, but would include the maximization of liberty through
mutual responsibility and caring in a manner presumably shared
by many of the founders of the American republic (Bellah, et al.,
1985).

Summary and Conclusion

It is difficult, if not inappropriate, to write about matters of
war and peace without passion. There are those who would
define knowledge as an objective, dispassionate search for truth. They would be critical of both the substance and the style of this paper. But theirs is not the truth that gives direction and meaning to human lives. Does an ever increasing capacity to consume more of the world’s resources purchase the good life? Does the always greater power which we seek for ourselves, individually and collectively, provide the security which we seek? Do the artificial scarcities enhance human creativity and guarantee progress in a manner that promotes justice? Or is it rather, as the novelist Milan Kundera (1985) has suggested, “man thinks and the truth escapes him”? Recalling Flaubert’s historical vision he summarizes, “stupidity does not give way to science, technology, modernity, progress, on the contrary, it progresses right along with progress” (Kundera, 1985, p. 11).

Who would voluntarily choose poverty over wealth, ignorance over knowledge, weakness over power? These are the false choices that have been offered to the people and the nations of the world. The language, the concepts and the ideologies within which they have been embedded must be challenged. Fortunately, the floodgate of new ideas has begun to open (Capra, 1982; Dallmayr, 1981; Schumacher 1973; Raskin and Bernstein, 1987; Griffin, 1978; Toffler, 1980). Thoughtful analysis and creative invention are an essential antecedent to political action.

The prevention of nuclear war is possible not only to the extent that we organize, demonstrate in opposition, and refuse to cooperate, but also to the degree that we can succeed in making it unthinkable. Some will view all this as an unrealistic, idealistic fantasy. Perhaps it is, but the animus for its expression derives from the intimate awareness that the alternative fantasy is too horrid to contemplate.

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