

War or Peace? We cannot survive with Real-Politik

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How can we clarify the issues surrounding war and peace, violence and nonviolence, when our view is obscured by the assumption—also promoted by a portion of the scientific establishment—that human evolution advanced solely by means of struggle and competition, that the survival of one species depends on the defeat of another one? We believe in our rational point of view because we are able to push aside our feelings, which we consider to be irrational. Feelings have become a threat for us and must be repressed; therefore, we judge a way of thinking to be realistic if it has been freed of empathy and the capability to share pain, to understand suffering, and to feel a connection with all forms of life. How did this come about?

What is reality if we are constrained from birth to see the world not as we experience it ourselves but as others tell us it is? Before and directly after birth our perceptions are shaped by empathy, not by cognitive intellectual processes. Our early empathic perceptions are direct and immediate, uninfluenced by society’s expectations, and for that reason are true to reality. But from the very first day of life, the way we ought to see the world is communicated to us by others, along with the message that our own perceptions have no validity (6,7). Thus, our cognitive perception, based on the expectations of those who raise us, never develops without distortion.

This is especially true if these expectations are not in accord with a child’s needs but rather meet with the parents’ need for self-esteem.

We live in cultures that are characterized by competition and insecurity and that make it difficult for people to develop the self-esteem that comes from a sense of one’s inner worth, which can evolve only if people learn to accept and share their suffering, pain, and adversity. This is what enables an inner strength to emerge—informed by an attitude of equanimity in spite of insecurity and of self-confidence in spite of helplessness. Only such a development forms a person’s genuine substance. In cultures that mistake strength for invulnerability, this kind of development is hardly possible because suffering, pain, and helplessness are stigmatized as weakness (6,11,12). This is why parents need their child in order to maintain a self-image of competence and self-assurance without self-doubt. In a culture in which one is constantly faced with the threat of failure, children are needed to enable their parents to maintain a fictitious sense of worth, with the result that parents do not see their children as they are but only in relation to themselves. In spite of their love and hopes for their children, they do not see what their children are really like but view them only in terms of providing approbation of the parental role. The child becomes the means to the end of sustaining the pose of mother and father as authority figures who are decisive and assured in their relationship with their child.

What are children to do who experience weakness, helplessness, pain, and rage? Apathetic and exhausted, they will, with time, submit to the expectations of their parents. But their submission distorts reality, and thus a rational solution later in life to crucial problems such as the question of war and peace is made impossible, for if we have learned from an early age to experience the pose of strength and self-assurance as reality, then “realistic” behavior is not based on reality at all but on our need to cling to

this pose as a remedy for our fears and insecurity (9, 13).

And so a change takes place in our emotional life. Feelings no longer emerge from our own empathically motivated perceptions but are now determined by our need for a sense of invulnerability in order to avoid supposed threats that stem from the terror children experience because their inner self is not given recognition. Only if they fulfill the expectations of their parents, only if they can maintain the emotional contact with their parents that is necessary for survival, do they receive approbation. And because parents themselves were shaped by a culture that scorns pain and suffering as forms of weakness, a culture that bases survival on getting the better of others, vulnerability is therefore seen as a threat to one's self-esteem. To prevent this from happening we learn to focus our feelings either on acquiring power ourselves or on identifying with those who have power. This means that our feelings—in the larger political realm as well—are no longer influenced by empathic perceptions but by concepts having to do with power, competition, and the need to put down others. As a result, realism then means merely security attained by means of power, positions of power, and actions that assure them. If this mechanism no longer works, war and violence are the only remaining solutions to problems (7, 9, 10).

A self that develops under these circumstances is not centered on the question of *who* one is but *what* one is. Who one is has to do with constantly confronting oneself and, as a result, with taking responsibility for one's actions, for one's own being. It has to do with recognizing one's own pain and the pain of others, with perceiving one's own boundaries and those of the other person. In the case of the question of *what* one is, on the other hand, it is not a matter of one's authentic self but of how one thinks one has to *appear* in order to gain status and power over others (6). This is the way people become, as Kierkegaard (15) so convincingly put it, completely in

thrall to their need to be recognized for their achievements. Thus, they do not live their own lives but rather lives that revolve around correct appearance. And “correct” here means complying with current concepts of normality.

In this process people begin to falsify their lives by seeking escape in abstract ideas that endow life with false premises, for these ideas are cut off from the empathic needs that make us human and also from the feelings of guilt and shame that arise from this kind of dissociation. This process encourages a cognitive kind of thinking that is cut off from empathic roots. Here lie the sources of the myths and symbols intended to shield us from insecurity and vulnerability. Thus, over millennia conflict, war, competition, and the accumulation of property and riches were the only valid “realities” of our world, and belief in heroism and the myths surrounding it—superhuman strength, insensitivity to pain, invulnerability—predominated. Reality is so transformed as a result that we often no longer recognize ourselves as human beings but merely as abstractions that have internalized these myths as symbols of their own being.

Human evolution cannot be correctly understood if we take it for granted that conflict and competition are the forces behind human development. Peter Kropotkin (16) already pointed this out in 1917; Stanley Diamond (4), Theodore C. Schneirla (22), Irven Devore (3), Melvin J. Konner (3), Ashley Montagu (19, 20), and recently Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (14), among many others, have demonstrated that cooperation and empathy are the determining factors in our evolution and that the survival of one species does not depend on the destruction of another. A false interpretation of Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest provides the basis for this misunderstanding. In Darwin's view of survival, “fittest” is not equated with “best” (22). The organism best suited for surviving nuclear war is the cockroach. It would inherit our planet!

“From a biological point of view, love is a determining factor in our evolution,” according to anthropologist Ashley Montagu (20). He adds, “We can safely assume that none of the early human populations would have survived if love and cooperation had not played a decisive role in their continuing existence.” Schneirla, who studied the approach-and-withdrawal behavior of many species that underlies peaceful-nonaggressive or defensive-aggressive behavior, showed that these mechanisms already exist at birth. Low stimulus intensities as produced by loving maternal behavior create approach reactions; high intensities of stimuli, as evoked by maternal rejection or punishment, lead to muscle contractions and to withdrawal and aggressive defensiveness (23, 24). In addition, continuous effects of low stimulus intensities form the metabolic system of an individual and thus influence his or her later level of excitation. This in turn leads to basic traits such as readiness for aggressive or cooperative interpersonal behavior.

With the rise of the so-called great civilizations, there developed structures of conquest and subjugation of the defeated peoples. We must assume that this always occurred when a lack of loving care created the emotional need to dominate others in order to compensate for the resulting insecurity. Such situations early in life led to conditions that generally have a disturbing influence on patterns of maternal care-giving and thus bring about the separation of growing humans from their potential for empathy, initiating a form of development that emphasized obedience. Obedience became the instrument by which the developing structures of domination and accumulated wealth assured their position by making identification with those in power the psychic “salvation” from the suffering and powerlessness of the oppressed. This identification, which leads to what the Finnish psychoanalyst Marri Siirala (25) described as the “delusional possession of reality,”_characterizes the

“adapted” individual and shows how adaptation often expresses obedience. Obedience to authority thus became the ideal for entire societies. How deeply rooted this phenomenon was can be demonstrated by the paradoxical fact that rebellions initiated in the name of freedom ended by taking on authoritarian power themselves. The outcome of this millennia-long development was described by Proust in the twentieth century as an impossible form of reality: “How can we have the courage to wish to live, how can we make the slightest move to preserve ourselves from death, in a world where love is evoked by a lie and consists solely in the need to have our sufferings appeased by whatever being has made us suffer?”

Here Proust recognized something of fundamental significance, namely, the longing in our obedience-oriented cultures to be saved by those who have caused our suffering, together with the inability to recognize them as responsible for this suffering. Being forced to be obedient while growing up leads to the inability to perceive our own empathic potential because of our anxiety and fear, which must not be acknowledged, since fear and uncertainty are labeled as weakness. Although we are driven by our fear, it must be denied and repressed. Here we can see the vicious circle of our development, which is influenced by a culture that causes parents to experience their infants’ aliveness and high spirits as disturbing or even threatening. As they get older, these children will soon be filled with anxiety and worry and will learn at an early age that their original, authentic self imperils their relationship with their parents and for this reason is bad. As a result, their innermost nature turns into something strange and foreign. And it is this alienated part of one’s self that must be fought against from now on.

The accompanying anxieties grow stronger in times of existential stress—caused, for example, by unemployment, loss of status and personal importance, insecurity inherent in a society based on competition that humiliates and isolates people. These

ever-present anxieties are held in check in economic good times owing to the fact that people feel they are part of society. Nowadays people feel secure in their identity, thanks to all the possibilities offered by a consumer society. Possessing things gives them a sense of well-being and thus a kind of identity and the feeling of belonging. But as soon as possessions and consumption are threatened, this false identity breaks down and the ever-menacing anxieties again come to the fore.

Sadly, the chase after possessions leads to increased egotism, which prevents or destroys any attachment to societal values. It leads to moral failure because, as Nobel-Prize-winning dramatist Eugene O'Neill aptly described it in assaying the relationship of the United States to its dependencies, ". . . [The] main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it, thereby losing your own soul and the things outside of it too" (5). What remains are hatred and the need to find enemies against whom the hatred can be directed. This process was advanced by the victory of the capitalist system over the communist one, a victory that unfortunately rejected the ideas of equality and fairness and destroyed these concepts as a political possibility. Of course, the rich and financially successful have always been accorded more credibility than those who are poor, but this is the case more than ever today. During the Cold War economic megalomania and the irresponsibility inherent in an exaggerated profit motive were reined in, but at present a financial elite with an overweening sense of its own importance has created a worldwide situation in which the gap between rich and poor grows greater by the day.

If democratic governments do not succeed in dealing successfully with the dangerous situation created by this inequality, the ever-present hatred will increasingly express itself as violence. And those who hate themselves the most but are not permitted to recognize their oppressors will seek solutions that are

far removed from reality. This opens the way for political leaders who conjure up images of an enemy that give legitimacy to this hatred and who take advantage of it for their own purposes of amassing power.

The enemy we are looking for in order to free ourselves of our hatred we find in the stranger, the Other, who reminds us of ourselves because he is similar to the way we originally were. By punishing him we can hold our head high, at the same time banning anxiety and fear from our consciousness. And the leaders, who in their megalomania incite war and conquest, achieve success because our societies produce people who allow themselves to be enslaved in order to escape their terror (17). In Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Elektra* (21) Orin, a soldier in the American Civil War, tells about the enemies he has killed on the battlefield, realizing the identity between himself and the hated Other, described above: "It was like murdering the same man twice. I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself!"

The way children are raised encourages them not only to bond at an early age with their tormentors but also to idealize them. In this way the structures of domination and the social norms represented by parents, school, and society thoroughly penetrate the psyche of growing children, becoming their determining mechanisms and thus forming their psychic structure. These structures and mechanisms imposed by society stand in the way of children perceiving their own perceptions and needs.

Parents misuse their child to preserve their own sense of adequacy and self-worth. Under these conditions, attachment to the parents exists on two levels: on the one hand, bonding takes place with the parents as they really are in terms of the behavior the child has experienced—their empathy, their meting out of punishment, their exercise of authority; on the second level, a bond is created with an idealized

image of the parents. In this case, children must limit their perception of their parents to the image the parents have of themselves, for children cannot simultaneously integrate their actual perception of their parents and the idealized image they have of them. For this reason, knowledge of their parents' true nature disappears from consciousness. The result is a reversal of reality.

One of my patients, a fifty-year-old geologist, talked about his father, who had volunteered to serve in Hitler's Wehrmacht (9). The father was not only extremely authoritarian, he also beat his son for even the slightest transgression. His mother, also subjected to the father's violence, never tried to protect her son. Only once, when he was very young, did she intervene because she thought the father was going to beat the boy to death in his rage. As an adult, whenever my patient heard a child crying, he became enraged because he interpreted the crying as an attempt to make demands on him. He was afraid that he would hurl a child of his own against the wall in such a situation. Of course, he didn't want to do that and had decided not to have children. This man did not want to pass on what had been done to him; nevertheless, on an unconscious level he was affected by his identification with his father. His reaction to a crying child corresponded to that of his father to him when he was little. His rage was the rage of his father, whose hatred the son had internalized as his own. In this manner his own being turned into something foreign to him that had to be punished in the external world. The pain he had experienced in childhood became alien to him and was then projected onto children who cried as he had once cried. He was thus punishing in another person the rejected part of himself.

This is how identification with the parents' self-image becomes the sole reality. On an unconscious level the secret knowledge of the parents' true nature is the source of a constant anxiety, which cannot be expressed. This anxiety and inner terror lead

to hatred of one's own being. Children protect themselves from their anxiety by clinging to the parents' pose as the only reality. This process harbors a threat to a democratic society: If children have internalized—that is, have become imprinted with—the pose as reality, then as adults they will regard this pose as the sole valid reality. They will hope for release from their deeply concealed fears by authority figures who display in an especially convincing way the pose of strength, decisiveness, self-confidence, and assurance. The hidden and threatening fear of the truth felt by these adults unleashes rage against everyone who dares to tell the truth. The pose then shapes a reality that is destructive of life.

What can save us from the plight created by alienation from our own feelings? "Paradoxically," writes His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1), "we can help ourselves only if we help the Other." And: "It is the cultivation of love and compassion, our ability to enter into and to share another's suffering, that are the preconditions for the continued survival of our species. . . . To understand the suffering of others . . . means to possess true empathy The feeling of community with all living creatures can be attained only if we recognize that we are all basically united and dependent on one another" (2).

This is why we must ascribe crucial significance to the living interaction between mother and child as a major factor in human evolution and do everything possible to support this process of bonding in its essential role in the development of human consciousness. Our ancestors cannot have been cut off from experiencing pain and suffering as we in great part are today. To quote Ashley Montagu once again: "If we . . . define love as caring behavior that confers survival benefits, then love is a decisive aspect of our evolution" (19, 20). Our urgent task is to give full support to this human interaction. It is empathy and cooperation—not profit, selfishness, and the drive for ever more bigness—that will lead us toward a more humane civilization than our present one.

Notes

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Marcel Proust's citation on page 6 is from the original French „À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu“, Volume V, La Prisonnière, page 110, Gallimard: Paris, 1987. The english translation of „Remembrance of Things Past“, vol. V, The Captive, page 63, Vintage Books: New York, 1970, is not quite right, therefore altered to make it conform to the original French.

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