The Joy of War and the Future of Humanity

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The Joy of War and the Future of Humanity

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I. THE JOY OF WAR

The title is in imitation of Julia Child's *Joy of Cooking* and Alex Comfort's *Joy of Sex* (although theirs are about “how to,” and mine is a critical essay.) I choose this title because there is a widespread aversion to war today in many quarters. Academic historians are often anti-war and thus unconsciously or consciously skimp in their attention to the subject. (A possible exception to this thesis is the popularity of books on the Civil War in the USA.) Yet, overall, it is clearly one of the most important subjects in the course of human events. Thus, although in principle against war myself, I have been brought to doing much research and thought on the subject.

The fact is that war is almost always welcomed by the general populace. On the eve of WWI, Sir Edward Grey might say that the lamps of civilization were going out in Europe, but most of the British population cheered the news of the declaration of war on Germany. It was expected to be a short and glorious (not brutish) episode—memories of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 were in mind—and the bogging down in the trenches for four years came as a horrid surprise. Germany and its Emperor Wilhelm were even more enthusiastic about the war, having been glorifying the dynamics of violence for a decade and more.

War was and is seen as masculine, embodying the highest virtues of the group. Its fuel is testosterone. In recent times, it has come to be “total war” (more to be said about this later). The unarmed populace is seen to be the opponent as much as its armed forces. Hiroshima and Nagasaki can be viewed as the ultimate in this direction. Total war had surfaced in WWI, with the unrestricted use of submarines. In such a view of war, the whole society was viewed as combatants. The unity of the nation, army and non-combatants, was the aim of leaders in that era. As Modris Eksteins in his wonderful book, *Rites of Spring*, writes, “‘Total war’ was the means by which this could be achieved. Now the soldier and civilian would no longer be distinguishable. A war of attrition would involve the commitment of the entire nation.”

Clausewitz, in *On War*, in a well-known and insightful phrase, said that “War is the continuation of policy by other means.” The next step in this thinking should be to add that policy is itself a war of parties. It is often fostered for partisan reasons. A particular war can be touted as a means of gaining domestic power (not to mention the “defense” industries seeking to profit from such activities; even without wars the arms trade is a vast affair).

Sports have long served as a sublimation for war. The claim that warriors are produced on the playing fields of Eton is one acknowledgment of this fact. Fox hunting is another, although less obvious example. American football and

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English rugby are more obvious, the former especially with its frequent cries from the spectators of “kill 'em!”

In a wonderful invocation, Charles Baudelaire writes that “The cannon thunders... limbs fly in all directions... one hears the groans of victims and the howling of those performing the sacrifice. It's Humanity in search of happiness.”

Nowadays, films and TV shows depict violence and mayhem in in-your-face fashion, knowing that their audience will relish the viewing. Sex and violence are often linked. Sado-masochism and similar “perversions” are presented with glee and are so viewed.

God is inevitably invoked as being on “our” side. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany in a speech at the outbreak of WWI declared that “God will guide the German sword to victory.”

Great Britain, France, and then the USA also placed God on their side. Needless to say, the victors claimed their invocation—often in the form of Providence—as proving them correct. Both sides ignored the fact that Christianity, in principle, was a message of peace. After all, the Crusades some centuries before had demonstrated the converse.

War moreover is a solution to national disunity (as the saying goes, nothing unites so much as a common enemy). Again to quote Kaiser Wilhelm, “I no longer know parties. I know only Germans.” And national unity itself, as in the case of Italy in 1860 and Germany in 1870, comes about through and after war. In democracies, such as the USA, for some decades the slogan was that partisan politics stopped at the water's edge. (Recent facts, such as the virulent nature of partisanship, suggest how outmoded this view has become.)

Another fact is that peaceful existence is often boring and pedestrian. War brings excitement. There is a sense among soldiers that no bullet is meant for them. Some, indeed, are risk takers, and glory in daredevil (one must pause for a moment and note the role of the devil here) escapades. Peaceful enactments of this sort are bungee-jumping and free-falling parachute jumps.

War also means a job and frequently upward social mobility. It entails vastly increased bureaucracies and budgets. It is ironic that those who are most vociferous about budget deficits are generally also those who are most bellicose. In any case, economic benefits generally result from war. Thus, after its defeat in WW II and subsequent suffering, Japan's dramatic recovery only arrived in the form of a war boom stimulated by the outbreak of conflict in Korea in June 1950.

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2 Quoted in Wayne Andersen, *German Artists and Hitler's Mind. Avant-Garde Art in a Turbulent Era* (Editions Fabriant, 207), 245. Andersen is an art and architecture historian; in addition he is a polyhistorian of immense talent for research and inquiry.


4 Quoted in Andersen, op. cit., 245.

5 Ibid., 250.

Many have argued that the recovery from the Great Depression in the USA only took place with the outbreak of WW II and its voracious appetite for military production, then spreading through the economy.

Is war rooted in human nature? My reading of Charles Darwin shows no mention of war, nor is there any such entry in a lengthy index of his two great works. What about the survival of the fittest? Head to head conflict surely figures, but it is a very minor means compared to other more important factors, such as changes in the environment and ecology.

Following upon Freud with his “On War,” the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, in his book The Anatomy of Human Destiny (1973) suggested that “a conflict exists in all people between necrophilia and biophilia, a rage for death and annihilation on one hand and an affirmation and love of life on the other.”

What about territoriality? Though again it does not figure in Darwin's work, it is, indeed, an important factor. Our nearest cousins on the evolutionary tree, the chimps, have been observed in murderous fights over territory. The human species for most of its existence—estimated at 99% of its life—wandered across the globe. When threatened by a stronger opponent, it simply picked up its small belongings and moved on. We are talking of groups numbering at most 50-60 individuals.

With the turn to agriculture, and thus settled areas, and the consequent rise of cities—and civilization—we witness the emergence of specialized activities such as a priesthood, and a warrior class, sitting on top of a largely agricultural populace. Artisans also emerge. Extracting obedience and financial support from the great mass of the populace—the peasants—warriors and priests enjoy their privileges and practices.

I shall not undertake even a brief treatment of the history of war. Instead, I want to move on to the notion of a just war. Having, I hope, shown that humans generally find war an enthralling and a delightful matter, and therefore hardly likely to lend itself to moral exhortations, it is important to examine another reason for war, even if the joy of it were to be discounted. (In passing, I should note that after the bloody trench warfare of WW I, a temporary revulsion against war did manifest itself.) I undertake this analysis because, for those who wish to do away with war, it is crucial to know, critically, the face of the “enemy.”

An early version of the just war is the Holy War. Here the sword is unsheathed in the cause of a God. Most evident in the monotheistic religions, an outstanding example in the West is the Crusades of the Middle Ages. In this case

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7 Quoted in Historically Speaking, September 2010, 39.
the blood of Christianity is involved. Islamic history has its own examples, ranging from its 7th century origins and spread to the use of terror by the fundamentalists today. One would be hard put to discriminate among the world's religions as to awfulness.

Today, rather than Holy War (though this persists) it is “just war” that is invoked when a group, usually a nation, goes to war. Not only does God bless the troops but secular Reason does so as well. In such a war, at a time of total war, the tendency is to go to extremes, with all means justified. Such an attitude can quickly slide into the idea of “preventive war,” as occurred under the Bush administration, with its unilateral war on Iraq. Needless to say, international law is simply pushed aside.8

The fact is that there is no such thing as a “just war.” Both sides, of course, claim that theirs is such a war. There can, however, be a justified war: WW II against the Nazis was such a war. (Of course, this too is a matter of perspective, for both sides can claim its cause justified, but the historian in this case must make a decision and not descend into pure relativism.) Alas, the judgment of history is often victor's judgment.

Such a charge could be leveled against the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials at the end of WW II. However, here the plaintiff was not so much the Allies and the Soviet but Humanity. A new concept emerged to sit alongside war crimes. It is the concept of Humanity. The crimes committed were now against the largest possible social body. What occurred was what deserves to be called a “Judicial Revolution.” Building on further trials—the Rwandan and the Yugoslavian—and culminating in the International Criminal Court (ineffective as it is), the transcendence of national sovereignty in the name of a higher sovereignty took place. Humanity came to prevail (in ideal if not always in reality). A new world was born.

Perhaps it would be better to call it a new globe. As a result of the on-going process of globalization, defined as increasing interdependency and interconnectivity, peoples are actually increasingly bonded to one another, often willy-nilly. A theme that can be seen running through all of history, globalization surged so much after WW II as to take on new meanings and to serve as a rupture in contemporary history. The term globalization itself appeared and gained currency in the 1960s-'70s, attesting to the emerging phenomenon.

As an immediate post-1945 development we see the outbreak of the “Cold War.” Marked by Winston Churchill's invocation of an “Iron Curtain” in his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri in 1946, the world seemed separated in two parts: the free world and the communist one. Though an effort was made at

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8 Cf. Carl Schmitt's view that “where one side claims to have a just cause thoughts of restraint are all too easily abandoned.” Quoted in Jason Ralph, “The laws of war and the state of the American exception,” Review of International Studies (2009), 35, 631-649, 641.
neutrality by Third World countries, the situation was marked by “you're either for or against me.” Sputnik, the hydrogen bomb, the further launching of missiles into space—these were the highlights of the era. As important and increasingly so in the long run was the “computer revolution.” The bonds among peoples now tightened and expanded exponentially.

Wars between the developed nations became more or less unthinkable. The European Union and its gradual development of increased ties among its parts effectively ended centuries of intramural armed conflict. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the emergence of a Russia shorn of much of its empire—and military strength—seemed to mark a sharp diminution of the possibility of a nuclear exchange. At the same time, after the Second World War a totally new dimension was given to war. Aggressive war could now be seen as a crime, and those who perpetrated it as war criminals. In addition, such criminals may now be brought to trial. In the long history of humanity and war this was a startling new development.

Humankind has entered, somewhat unconsciously, into a new epoch. Often faltering and ineffective in practice, the ideal sketched above stands before us. We must acknowledge the “joy of war,” and thus realize the face of the enemy, and thus the requirement that international institutions and global structures be established to sustain it. Such a “Judicial Revolution” is well underway. The Nuremberg, Rwandan, and Yugoslavian Trials have laid the basis for this tremendous turn of the historical wheel. The International Criminal Court has not yet functioned well, but stands as an ideal.

Meanwhile the nature of war itself has changed. Revolution and revolutionary war seem over, an epochal marking. Characterized by “revolutionary ascetics,” as I have called them, they now seem an anachronism (cf. The Revolutionary Ascetic, Basic Books, 1976). In their place has come the ill-named “War on Terror,” which has sought to place terrorism in the camp of war. Escalating the undoubted threat into a global conflict has endowed the small-bore Al Queda with enormous prestige. At the moment, the latter has been “winning,” instilling fear and costly security measures (though the large number of national security personnel might otherwise swell the unemployment figures on the United States and elsewhere).

How best to deal with these ideological fanatics? One response would be for the Western powers to withdraw from the Middle East areas in which their imprint of imperialism has been strong. From the perspective of Al-Qaeda and their allies, they are fighting what they see as a war of liberation. Though there is in this view a territorial base to their claims, they believe that the conflict must be waged in global fashion. Obviously the West, dependent as it is on Middle East oil, is not about to withdraw from their lands. In the future, one possible solution is the widespread use of alternative, non-carbon based energy sources. Time, it is said, heals many struggles.
II. THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

The future of humanity can be thought about in two senses. The first, and more usual one, is in terms of such processes as climate change, economic prospects and so forth. Much has been written on these subjects. The second is in terms of the concept of humanity. An awareness of the latter began to take shape at the end of WW II with the Nuremberg Trials and their charge of crimes against humanity. These were followed by the Rwandan and Yugoslavian Trials. The question then became obvious: What was this “humanity” that was being talked about? It was clearly something that transcended existing nationalisms. Did it have more positive features of its own? Reflection suggested that at least two features could be discerned. One was the increased connectivity resulting from globalization. The other was what I have been calling a “Judicial Revolution.”

Much has recently been written about globalization. In my view, a kind of rupture occurred after WWII. As a result especially of the development of the computer and the placing of satellites in the sky an enormous enlargement and at the same time tightening of bonds has taken place. Significantly, the very term globalization appeared sometime in the fifties and sixties and became widely accepted by the late '80s. Research and reportage has taken place in various venues. The whole field, as is to be expected, is in debate and contestation.

The Judicial Revolution starts with the Nuremberg Trials and the charge of “crimes against humanity.” As remarked, after the Rwandan and Yugoslavian Trials the notion was pursued, culminating in an International Criminal Court. Here, truly, we see a transcendence of the nation state. Humanity asserting itself in a universal claim to human rights, took on a new sovereign quality. It is not that national identity and law vanished—far from it, indeed with a reaction setting in—but that an additional identity and law now existed. In a federal system, for example, one could find one’s identity in a local state, nation and now humanity. Needless to say, besides reaction, many peoples were without a strong central government and found their prime and sole loyalty to a tribe. Allegiance to humanity seems out of their reach, or even imagination.

Clearly, the problems facing all humankind are increasingly of a global nature. Climate change and economic challenges do not stop at national or tribal boundaries. We find many peoples, but few traces of a sense of humanity. It is the misfortune of the Middle East and Africa, both for themselves and the rest of the world, that the values and institutions of modernity and now globalization have been less able to flourish there.

The promise of the fifties-sixties appears to have faded away. Does this mean that the concept of humanity, and thus of Humanity, has faded away? Are
there any signs of hope anywhere? It used to be said that the last, best hope of mankind was the USA. Clearly, that is no longer the case. Challenged by China economically, I want to suggest that it is the great landmass of Asia where the torch of Humanity may be relighted.

Monotheistic religions, such as the Christian and Islamic, may claim universalism in theory but in practice are obviously divisive. China is unusually free of religion, and always has been. Instead, it has been inspired by Confucianism, an ethical system, avoiding the supernatural. It would appear that humanism has deep roots in China. Does such humanism prepare the way for the concept of Humanity?

As should be well known, historical events are vastly subject to contingency. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking in terms of broad currents, where intention and human action can act as a form of rudder. If China sees itself as the leader, the middle kingdom, in the move to Humanity, it may come to see its destiny in such terms. In this sense, it may be the last, best hope of humankind.

If China does not assume this leadership, the alternative possibility is that only a major crisis, a truly globe-encircling breakdown, will bring about the sweeping challenge that will cause peoples to transcend their local adherences. If not, we could enter into a vast, dark age.

At the moment, we are faced with immediate challenges such as climate change, economic problems, and the like. Peoples are awash in fear. The historical record seems to show that in such situations the worst will out. Extremists on all sides swamp the middle. Sensible solutions are swept aside. Stupidities of various sorts arise and dominate. Unable to deal adequately with the immediate challenges, humankind is less likely to rise to the challenge of forging itself as Humanity. Alas, then, the two developments are correlated. Humankind's immediate problems are increasingly global (which is, of course, always manifest as well in the local).

The conclusion is dismal. We are, it would appear, on the edge of a dark abyss. Humanity's future seems dire. In the face of this future, we can only refuse to despair and to fight on as we can. It was Immanuel Kant, who thought of Humanity in an abstract, philosophical fashion, and who described humans as made of crooked wood. Out of such material, he thought, only partial solutions could be hoped for. We in our time are still made of crooked wood. Our task, it would seem, is to straighten ourselves out, and march forward into the future, hopefully of Humanity.