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Freud, and the Enjoyment of War

Summary:

The author analyses Freud's letter to Einstein ("Why War?") putting it into relation with more modern reflections on war. In particular, he criticises Freud's central thesis that cultivation works against war: on the contrary, war is a very mature product of cultivation, it is to generic violent conflict what marriage is to free sexual union. In addition, he analyses pacifism (of which Freud was a representative) as a recent historical product: it established itself starting in the 18th century, when the producers of wealth (workers, entrepreneurs, technological innovators) replaced warriors (the nobility) in the role of leadership they once had in societies. It is in a society dominated by production that the ideal of avoiding war, as expressed by socialist and liberal-democratic narratives, gains ground.

In ancient Greece, the day after a major battle had taken place, an authentic form of Thana-tourism was organised. Groups would go to the battlefield, left as it was after it had ended, with the blood still fresh, bodies torn apart, vultures on the corpses and the ghostly silence of the ceased carnage. They would go there to contemplate *the event*. It was precisely this atrocious spectacle that gave the voyeurs of the massacre pleasure. Something that would give pleasure to many even today, if a certain respect for death did not forbid it.

We may not want to admit it, but one reason why war has never ceased to exist is the fact that bloody conflict offers jouissance. Even today, like in Ukraine. The devastated cities shown to us on TV are atrocious, yet I have heard comments along the lines of "what I wouldn't give to stay in those places!"

1.

In 1931 the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, a body of the League of Nations, decided to ask the man who at the time was considered the most intelligent in the world, Albert Einstein, to find an answer to the question "Why war?" In the implied hope that a genius like him would discover a way to avoid it forever. Einstein in turn proposed to engage Freud – whom he had only met once in person in Berlin – in a discussion with him on this subject. Freud's response to Einstein is a short text "Why War?", published in 1933.

Freud's position on the fatality of war (*das Verhängnis des Krieges*) appears only mildly pessimistic. Today, we would say, in the wake of Gramsci's motto, that in him the pessimism of the intellect – "there is no recipe for avoiding war forever" – does not exclude a certain optimism of the will. Within the classic Enlightenment tradition, Freud concludes by saying that everything that promotes cultural development (*Kulturentwicklung*) also works against war. But, in this case, Freud's Enlightenment optimism appears to be a concession to hope within a vision that is ultimately rather unoptimistic. Indeed, a few pages earlier he had

dismissed as delusive the Bolshevik ideal of a world pacified by a universal socialist fraternity. (And indeed socialist nations ended up going to war against each other: The Soviet Union versus China, Vietnam versus Cambodia, China versus Vietnam... And the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Freud knew only too well that the peaceful message of the Gospel had by no means prevented tragic wars between Christians over the centuries).

Freud begins from a precise historical view: that the source of all law (*Recht*) is violence (*Gewalt*). “Law was originally brute violence” (Freud, 1933a, p. 209; 1933b, pp. 19-20) That is, law did not originate as a way to curb and inhibit the violence of certain individuals – the strongest, the most powerful, the most aggressive, the greediest. He believes that law itself is violence, even if it appears to us as a barrier against violence: it arose as a response of the vast majority to the violence of the few, but in the law “there is still violence, ready to turn against anyone who opposes it, works by the same means, pursues the same ends” (1933a, p. 205; 1933b, p. 15). Law is the violence not of individuals, but of an entire community (*Gemeinschaft*). I stress this: a violence of a *Gemeinschaft*, not of a *Gesellschaft*. And insofar as every war is a conflict between two communities, as we would say in the wake of Freud, war is always a matter of law. The violence of war is not a violation of law; it expresses the lawfulness for societies to resort to violence. Every law is a socialisation of violence.

As we can see, Freud completely reverses the Rousseauian position, which considers the original man essentially good-natured. Freud is far closer to Hobbes’s vision of *homo homini lupus*, a man is a wolf to another man. The whole historical drama of humanity, according to Freud, is the process of the self-domestication of a wolf. A self-domestication towards which Freud himself exhibits a clear ambivalence[1]. He would go on to say, in fact, that “we are shaped by the long process of the development of civilization, to which we owe the best of what we have become, as well as a good part of what we suffer from” (Freud, 1933a, p. 214; 1933b, p. 25) . The cost of the development of civilization is a widespread discontent (*Unbehagen*). In other words, to avoid the horrors of violence we come up against a psychic malaise, which is in some ways a violence against ourselves.

Freud justly denies the existence of an international law, for the simple reason that the law is related to the strength and power of a state, and then as now we lack an international super-state able to force individual nations to abide by certain rules. This applied to the League of Nations of the time as it does to the UN today. Law is not ethics, law is linked to the ability of an apparatus, called the state, to enforce certain imposed rules. The concept of law is inseparable from that of

force – a state that failed to prosecute criminals would no longer be a state, and we could de facto say that that nation is without a law[2]. But Freud is even more radical: according to him “laws are made by and for the rulers (*die Gesetze werden von und für die Herrschenden gemacht werden*), giving the servile classes fewer rights” (1933a, p. 206; 1933b, p. 16). Freud by no means believes in a natural law; his view of the law is more reminiscent of Marx’s.

Here Freud essentially applies to violence – which he relates to the death drive – the same argument he had applied to erotic drives, to sexuality. For him, sublimation – those creative activities that exclude sexual fulfilment – is not a barrier against sexuality but is, far from it, an expression of sexuality itself, albeit a sexuality the goal of which has been changed. Just as sublimation is a sociosyntonic adjustment of sexuality, similarly law is a sociosyntonic adjustment of violence. Sexuality and violence are in short the *arché* – the principle, the domain – of civil or social life in general.

2.

Freud reminds us that violent conflicts arise within the same community; civil wars do take place. On the other hand, he admits that wars can have a positive effect, as they can lead to the establishment of unitary

and internally pacified states – and here he quotes the case of the Roman empire and France. Now, here Freud falls into an ethnocentric prejudice, insofar as he contrasts Rome and France with the conquests of the Mongols and the Turks, which he thought only led to calamity. An unfair comparison. The Mongols formed the second largest empire in history (1206-1368) after the British. The Pax Mongolica favoured more and more productive exchanges between East and West. The China that Marco Polo visited and described in the 13th century was dominated by the Mongol Great Khan. The Yuan dynasty is remembered as a radiant moment of Chinese culture. As for the Turks, they formed an empire that lasted over four centuries and inherited much of Arab culture.

Freud points out that the powers that hold a community together are “violent compulsions” and “ties of sentiment between the members of the group” (Freud 1933a, p. 203), i.e. the mutual identifications between them. Here he evidently recalls the theory already developed in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in which he described a *Masse*, a crowd, catalysed by a leader (*Führer*), a collective broadly speaking in the political sense, like the church and the army (1921a, 1921b). The transition from *Masse* to *Gemeinschaft*, from a political crowd to a community (to a national society, we would call it), is the event in which violent compulsion (*Zwang der Gewalt*) is most at work. Freud, however, insinuates that if emotional bonds are lacking, violent compulsion will suffice to hold a community together... A rather extreme idea, as it admits the existence of societies without any social cohesion, held together only by constraints, despotic societies run by a police state. I do not rule out the possibility that such a society could exist for a certain time, but I do not think it could last: every community or society needs a minimum of social cohesion, that is those “emotional bonds” that make a crowd a *Mass*, a political entity. Even totalitarian regimes such as the Nazi Third Reich or the Stalinist USSR or Maoist China enjoyed a fairly broad consensus. Most in Germany believed in Nazism as most in the USSR believed in bolshevism. And indeed, when this consensus failed in the USSR, the communist system “imploded”.

In a certain sense, every society is essentially “democratic”, even if ruled by a pharaoh: if coercive power does not enjoy a certain consensus, it will not last long.

Conversely, Freud also allows for a society founded purely on the bonds of identification between its members, without any violent compulsion: but this society seems to me no less improbable than the former. It would be the implementation of an anarchic society, a social paradise. Almost every concrete society is made up both of emotional cohesion between its members and external constraints; what matters is the dosage and the way they are combined.

Later, however, Freud would say that “Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war” (1933a, p.213; 1933b p. 23). This too is doubtful. By emotional bonds he essentially means identifications, the process by which we recognise others as ‘fellow citizens’, as “our own”. But Freud seems not to see that the identifying Eros that holds social groups together spontaneously produces its shadow, its Other, the potential or actual enemy, against whom war will always be possible. It is like in any competitive sport: we identify with the players of *our* team, the one we root for, but we hate those of the rival team. The more we reinforce the unity of *Us*, the more the threat of a *Them* rises as its double. In Italy we are familiar with one of Ennio Flaiano’s witticisms: “If the peoples of different nations knew each other better, they would hate each other more”. In a certain sense, Freud does not fully exploit his own idea that the erotic impulse and the destructive impulse always mix to the point of becoming inseparable: the more we are “patriotic”, the more we love our fellow citizens, the more belligerent we become; the more we will tend to distrust *other* fatherlands, other love collectives. After all, wars are conflicts between loving sets. Patriotic fervour has always led, sooner or later, to waging war against the Other.

The essential point, however, is the following: insofar as war can also perform a positive, unifying function, and insofar as it expresses a violence that Freud considers part of a fundamental drive, how can he then justify his own pacifism? Freud detests war, but is it possible to rationally, scientifically support this horror of war? His answer is: we are pacifists “because we cannot do otherwise”. That is, he points out, “we are pacifists because we are obliged to be for organic reasons”[3] (Freud, 1933a pp. 213; Freud, 1933b, p. 25).

The arguments of pacifism are therefore rationalisations: one is not horrified by war through reasoning, but “for organic reasons”. This statement surprises us. In what sense is pacifism *organic*? Freud uses the same term, “organic”, in the following paragraph: there is an organic basis (*organische Begründungen*) to the fact that our ethical and aesthetic ideals in *Kultur* have undergone a change. But why say that these changes due to cultivation have organic foundations? Does it mean that changes in human idealities end up having an organic, i.e. biological, effect?

This seems to disprove what Freud had said and would later reaffirm: that cultivation changes the structure of our drives. The intellect is strengthened and dominates the life of the drives, aggression is internalised, in the sense that it turns from others to oneself. Why then is the change in this structure an organic necessity?

The truth is that for Freud the organic is not perennial in humans, it isn't born with them, but is itself a product of each individual's history. Cultivation separates humans: some remain “uncultivated races and backward strata of the population” (*unkultivierte Rassen und zurückgebliebene Schichten*), i.e. “undomesticated” segments of the population, which, however – Freud insinuates – “multiply more rapidly” than the “cultivated” (Freud 1933a, p. 212). He already possessed the data according to which the lower the economic and cultural level of a mass, the more prolific it is. We have to think that, according to Freud, the “uncultivated and backward” are still willing to go to war because pacifism is an “organic” achievement, something somatised despite being instilled by culture.

As we can see, Freud was very distant from a socialist-democratic optimism; in short, he was politically incorrect. For him class differences were in some ways organic differences too (albeit of psychic, not physical, organisms). However, I believe that such ideas, even if no one would dare express them so directly today, underlie the pacifism of today's intelligentsia: wanting peace at any cost (even at the cost of surrender and humiliation) is perceived as a chic cause, the irreversible propensity of a spiritual elite. Pacifism is considered the peak of the development of civilisation; wars, even when sacrosanct, are barbaric.

4.

This was Freud's vision. How can we consider it *today*?

What Freud does not grasp is pacifism as a historical product. Projects for a perpetual peace significantly originated in the 18th century, with the Enlightenment (Kant's being one of the most famous). Why not earlier? Because the great empires which lasted from antiquity to the last century, such as the Austro-Hungarian empire, were dominated by a warrior aristocracy, and often also by the clergy. The nobility consisted of warriors; kingdoms and empires had a military (more than theological) foundation. In the last two centuries things have changed: the foundation of modern nations is the “Third Estate”, as it was called in France in the *Ancien Régime*, i.e. the producers. Capitalists and proletarians, entrepreneurs and workers, but producers all the same. Hence the primacy that economics has assumed in modern societies as the fundamental criterion of politics. Now, societies dominated by producers and no longer by warriors yearn for perpetual peace. Producers, whether of the left or the right, are not interested in fighting other producers, since the game they all want to play is the win-win game, everyone stands to gain from the production and exchange of goods. Whether achieved by a liberal-democratic society or a socialist one, perpetual peace has in any case become a fundamental goal of modernity. On the other hand, however, societies hegemonised by producers also require a people's army (a male one, more recently also female): every citizen is requested to

be a warrior, which is a lot to ask. On the one hand modern societies are pacifist, on the other they involve their entire populations in war. This contradiction dramatizes the modern debate around peace and war.

When I say that modern societies dominated by producers are pacifist, I by no means mean that they are peaceful! In fact, the last two centuries have seen the most catastrophic wars between producer countries. But ideals are one thing and reality another. Every modern war tends to present itself as *the last war*, after which there will be perpetual peace... War is waged to make peace, which should be obvious[4], but this is the contradiction of the modern narrative, be it liberal-democratic or socialist.

The fact that Freud and Einstein were pacifists was not then due to an evolution of *Kultur*, whereby intellectuals abhor war insofar as they are intellectuals. Many philosophers and scholars before them had also been warriors. Descartes, for example, or Wittgenstein, who volunteered in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War. The fact is that Freud and Einstein, considered the top scientists of their time, belonged to a modern nobility, one that was not made up of warriors or priests, but of those who produce intellectually, primarily scientists and technologists. Freud and Einstein discussed peace precisely because they lived in a *Kultur* in which cultural producers were already the aristocracy. What Freud takes as an “organic” fact is instead a product of history: the end of the two thousand-year hegemony of warriors. Today the military are mere state employees.

There is one aspect of Freud’s vision that we cannot accept today; his *evolutionist* – in the sense of progressive – view of human history. A view that was dominant in his time, but which the anthropology of the second half of the 20th century has dissolved. Freud speaks of primitive hordes, that is, he believes in what was still referred to as barbarism. According to this vision, human history progressed from barbarism, i.e. from lawless and unregulated human aggregations, to cultivation, in which a law and the relinquishing of primitive impulses prevail. Today, however, we speak of any human society, even the most technologically primitive, as a *culture* no more barbaric than our own. Today, we consider what Freud calls here primal state (*ursprüngliche Zustand*) a myth, because no human group that we have been able to discover in centuries of exhaustive explorations of the planet can be considered a truly “primal society”. There are no natural societies – although this does not always lead us to conclude that all societies are therefore natural. There are societies that are technologically very backward, but not barbaric. Even societies without writing have rules... and above all, a language is spoken, and no languages are more or less primitive[5]. The *nature versus culture* opposition – corresponding to the *barbarism versus civilisation* opposition – has been replaced by another view, according to which every society, every culture, *unfolds* human nature by fulfilling its potentially infinite possible variations.

According to this point of view there is no transition from the violence of the strongest to socialised violence; rather, let us say that violence is always socialised. Contrary to what Freud seems to think, war would not then be a primitive stage of humanity, but, in some respects, precisely a mature product of cultivation. That is, the more civilised we are, the more warlike we are. Compared to a disorderly fight between gangs, war is something highly organised, indeed, it is the most hierarchized and disciplined activity in society. The armed forces are founded on obedience and the most advanced technology, they are at the cutting edge of the techno-sciences.

This does not alter the fact that in certain historical phases – particularly in many Greek city-states – the army did not only consist of specialists but also had a democratic basis. In Athens one of the few elective roles was that of the ten *strat?goi*, heads of the armed forces – at the time the people practically chose their own generals. And the army of the *polis* consisted largely of hoplites armed with shields and spears, of common male citizens aged 18 to 60 (Socrates too was a hoplite). The army consisted of the male population in arms[6]. It is also striking that the ancient philosophers, who did not refrain from condemning so many things of their age, never decried war; it was considered an evident necessity.

5.

For many, the organisation of armies is the most advanced possible form of society. This is the concept of a barracks society, like in 18th century Prussia. Some of the great technological breakthroughs in history are closely linked to war strategies. This is the case of the Internet, a system invented to ensure communications in the event of a nuclear attack on the country. War is not only an expression of primal violence – of an intrinsic aggressiveness – in human beings, but above all of the cultivation of this violence, not unlike what marriage has done to sexual impulses. We could say that war is to chaotic physical conflict what marriage is to sexual urges. In other words, war is the “marriage” of violence. Can we say that both marriage and war originated with *Homo sapiens*, or rather that *Homo sapiens* originated with marriage and war?

Freud mentions the Roman Empire and the French monarchy as two flourishing and cohesive nations (1933a, p. 207; 1933b, p. 17). But, in certain epochs, the supremacy of these nations was closely linked to their military excellence. This is certainly true of the Romans, capable of building a war machine – the phalanx – that proved to be essentially invincible. As for the kingdom of France, it is inseparable from its military excellence, from Charlemagne to Napoleon. Today, the hegemony of Anglo-American culture is linked not only to the economic supremacy first of England and then of the United States, but also to the unrivalled power of the two countries’ armed forces.

The idea that there will always be wars is rooted in the assumption that in many cases war is the lesser evil. Fighting and defeating Hitler cost tens of millions of lives, but deep down we all think that the war against the Nazis was the lesser evil. Not least because by fighting it we saved the lives of millions of Jews in Europe. A country can be as peaceful as it wants, but this does not prevent it from being attacked in certain cases; it is what happened in World War II to countries that did not wish to become involved in any kind of war, such as Denmark, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Albania, Greece, etc. Pacifists always mock the old adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, but I believe it will never become obsolete. Countries that have not been involved in wars for centuries (more often due to good luck than to choice), such as Switzerland and Sweden, have strong armies. As long as there is the possibility that somewhere in the world some rampant aggressor is in the making, whether an Alexander the Great or an Attila, a Genghis Khan or a Hitler, a Julius Caesar, a Napoleon or a Putin – the wisest option will always be to prepare for war, to try to dissuade your potential attackers. Sometimes, truths are terribly trivial.

In spite of all this, we are repulsed by war as something that gives free rein to something horrendous in humans that should be repressed (though psychoanalysis distrusts of all forms of repression): taking pleasure in killing, torturing, destroying, in risking one’s life to prevail over and dominate others. As we have seen, Freud makes this horror of war an idiosyncrasy of the cultivated, something “organic” that he believes depends on cultururation. For them war is *instinctively* obscene, even though this instinct derives from a psychic restructuring.

We would have to ask Freud, however, to what extent the idealities of *Kultur* – both ethical and aesthetic – are themselves imbued with a *vis polemica*, i.e. with belligerency. The rivalry between philosophical, aesthetic, political and even psychoanalytic currents often takes the form of authentic cultural wars; bloodless of course, but still wars (and in some cases even bloody: consider Socrates’s hemlock and Giordano Bruno’s burning at the stake). Significantly, the great artistic currents of the 20th century used military metaphor to name themselves: avant-gardes.

6.

But is it true that war, with all its horrors, has really been excluded from the aesthetic ideals of modern *Kultur*?

It would suffice to consider the paeans of the Italian Futurists or of Gabriele D'Annunzio to “the beauty of war” in the early 20th century. This beauty emerges not when the horror of war is concealed but, on the contrary, when the *pleasure of horror* is artfully exploited. It is not surprising that horror films and videos thrive, and war films and narratives tend more and more to exploit the fascination of dismay.

In Italy, as early as middle school eleven-year-olds begin to savour the first truly great epic that marked the beginning of Western literature: The *Iliad*, which is all about war. Children are encouraged to revel in the way Achilles mangles Hector's body... As we all know, war has inspired some of the greatest masterpieces of literature and theatre, and in more recent times of cinema, of the West or otherwise, from the second part of the *Aeneid* to Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*... War has inspired such cinematic masterpieces as Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* and *Full Metal Jacket*, up to Gitai's *Kippur* and Mendes's *1917*... In short, the aesthetics of war is more than ever part of our culture. That today war is no longer extolled but instead condemned is of little importance: its representation gives us enjoyment precisely because of its unacceptability. It is like in tragedy, where cathartic pleasure derives from the arousal of the mournful feelings of pity (*eleos*) and anguish (*phobos*). Films that purport to be pacifist, insofar as they take pleasure in depicting the horrors of war, appeal to a fascination with war that is far from pacifistic.

For centuries, the “baptism by fire”, i.e. the direct confrontation with the horrors of war, was extolled as a fundamental moment of male education. Being able to bear the unbearable – it was thought – was the best *Bildung* for a man, just as for medical students it is essential to overcome the shock of their first lessons in which corpses are dissected. Now, the horror aesthetics of war have a similar value for the audiences: it is as if they were being told “if you can enjoy horrific war scenes *aesthetically*, then you are a first-class spectator”. Tolerating the grossness of war is a sign of superiority, of psychic mastery, not unlike that of a surgeon.

Modern pedagogy tends not to conceal the horrors of life from children: witnessing people's deaths, the sight of corpses, sexual acts or acts of violence, scenes of deprivation and starvation. It is thought that only if we confront children with the unbearable side of life can we help them cope with adult life adequately.

It could be argued: the artistic representation – *mimesis*, simulation, Aristotle called it – of war is one thing, experiencing real war is entirely another. Living through it cannot be a pleasant experience. And yet many do find pleasure in war. We hear of volunteer fighters who enlist in various parts of the world to take part in wars; often for ideological reasons, though most are mercenaries. Sometimes idealistic and economic motivations (fighting wars to earn a living) combine – militias of this kind are also present in the war in Ukraine, on both sides. And those who opt for a military career today are undoubtedly attracted to war. In short, authentic war fascinates more than a few, especially males. And this fascination with war is not necessarily typical of those with a low cultural level, as Freud seems to think. Che Guevara, for example, was an educated warrior. Some warriors were also great writers, from Julius Caesar to Ernst Jünger, from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to Joseph Heller. And who could deny that a national Italian hero like Garibaldi was deeply attracted to war? A just war also needs to be palatable.

Gory westerns or far eastern martial arts films have an appeal because they stage duels between individuals, not actual wars; a war is a duel between communities. The fascination with war should then question us about the fascination for weapons and physical conflict in general. In a shooting gallery too you imagine yourself shooting at *someone*, usually someone you hate. From duels to war, the full range of the pleasures of being-against expresses itself.

What makes so many people love armed conflict and war? (And why do men tend to like war, or hunting, more than women?[7]) There are several factors.

One is the *competitive drive*, like in sport: the pleasure of competing and outdoing the other. In the early days of the war in Ukraine in 2022, a 13-year-old boy asked me “are you rooting for Ukraine or Russia?” War is a hyperbolic sport. For many centuries ancient Latin society was characterised by a passion for the gladiatorial arts, radical forms of sport – and we should ask: is there not something gladiatorial in every competitive sport? It is no coincidence that sports fans often borrow symbols and metaphors from war. The powerful in ancient Rome created or financed gladiatorial schools to win favour among the plebeian masses – Caesar, for instance, organised such schools and was very popular with the Roman plebs – in the same way as many ambitious and powerful men of today win favour among the masses by managing sports teams (like Berlusconi with soccer). To this we can also add that election campaigns are experienced, by those who are passionate about them, as something halfway between a war and a competitive sport.

As well as this competitive drive – which cannot be reduced to aggression and even less so to the death drive – passion for war includes *irascibility*. Plato’s *Republic* acknowledges three social strata – rulers, warriors and craftsmen[8]. The warriors correspond to the irascible part of the soul, and in the later tradition would become the noblemen, characterised by courage. This irascible part of the soul becomes military valour, something socio-syntonic, to the extent that anger is controlled and overcome in ?????, warlike virtue. The true warrior should not carry anger and above all should not hate the enemy – he should be inhabited by calm and detachment. The warrior is in fact all the more valiant if he admires the enemy – every true warrior dreams of an opponent of equal stature. This is something we can see even in the portrayal of the most recent war films: Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) show the US military’s great respect for Charlie, the Vietnamese enemy. True warriors act as *fairly* with their enemies as athletes with their opponents.

This is the paradox of military *virtus*: even though, as we all believe, it originates in raging hatred for those who stand in the way of our satisfaction, we need to somehow sublimate these irascible feelings – not only Eros but aggression too can be sublimated. One needs to yield to non-hatred and non-rage to be a true warrior, even though hatred and anger are the original source of all warlike virtues.

Another element that seems to me constitutive of the art of war is a *taste for danger*. It is what D’Annunzio expressed when he interpreted the acronym MAS (*motoscafo armato silurante*, torpedo-armed motorboat), he was captain of one of these, as *Memento Audere Semper* (Always Remember to Dare). This taste for defying danger is not exclusive to the warrior, of course, it is also the mainspring for many sports: mountaineering, exploration in unknown lands, space travel, F1 racing... Again, the only way to derive pleasure from danger is to feel danger but not to fear it. The pleasure derived from fearing for your life becomes courage, daring, precisely when you cease to fear for your life. If a mountaineer is afraid, he can no longer climb. Yet he is a mountaineer insofar as he has to overcome a fear that is lurking in the background, a fear that turns into the jouissance of overcoming it.

The point is that the competitive drive, irascibility and the taste for danger are affections that even a pacifist, even Einstein or Freud, can appreciate and accept. Even Mahatma Gandhi had a sense of competitiveness (fighting the British) and perhaps a taste for danger. In fact, he often compared himself to a soldier. A passion that the pacifist can never accept in the warrior is therefore a deeper and unacceptable one: the enjoyment of the massacre of bodies. A sadistic pleasure, which is however also sublimated into what I would call warlike frigidity.

Epic poems and paintings first, then films and videos, have given us pleasure by showing all the horrors of war. After the release of Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which depicted moments of the Normandy landings in 1944 and what followed, some protested that such a crude portrayal of the war made us entirely forget the ideal values of the struggle against Nazism and to establish freedom and democracy... You may decide to enlist for idealistic reasons, but in the fire of battle there is no way of keeping them always in

mind: you have to accept the inhuman character of war, even if you are convinced that you are on the right side. I would describe this horror as a lack of ????? (*aidos*), by which the Greeks meant not only modesty and shame, but all forms of *respect*. *Aidos* is not only what embarrasses us if we walk around naked, for example, but also what embarrasses us if we have to brutalise someone, even if it is for good reasons. Whether with sex or with violence, we always see *aidos* emerge. We can therefore say that those who dislike war regard it as too *shameless*.

Some may argue: when we have sex we hide, whereas violence is often wielded in public, indeed exhibited as a glorious act. But sexual intercourse also has a public socio-syntonic value: a wedding feast is actually a celebration of the bride and groom's coitus, and in some cultures it ends with the consummation of the marriage before several witnesses. The shame of sex is reversed into the public realm. In the same way as a battle, if won, is a festive event; provided we don't look at it too closely. The meticulously detailed description of violence is the aggressive equivalent of pornography – we can speak in this case of *ktenography*, the representation of murder (from ??????, I kill). The obscenity of pornography certainly does not consist in the fact that the protagonists copulate – an act that is not only considered normal but is even extolled – but rather in the fact that the sexual act is shown too closely, it is too visible. Similarly, the obscenity of *ktenography* consists in showing the confrontation too closely and visibly. In both cases there is a lack of *aidos*. It is fine to devote a cult to a great warrior, be it George Washington, Garibaldi, Giáp or Che Guevara... as long as we are not shown what war is really like!

Having sex and killing, the two extremes – amorous and wrathful – of human activity, which for this very reason tend not to be spoken about or represented, even though there tends to be a strong desire to speak about them and represent them. This is the reason why today's media increasingly violate any representational taboos and tend more and more to feature pornography and *ktenography*. We are in the age of Glasnost, of complete transparency.

8.

The question Einstein and Freud raised was whether there was any hope of humanity ever overcoming war. War, not armed conflict. Even if there were a single planetary state with a monopoly on legitimate violence, this would not be able to prevent uprisings, secessions, internal conflicts. The American war against Iraq in 2003 was relatively short, the real war, so to speak, began after it, in the form of civil war, with terror attacks, bombs, massacres, guerrilla warfare... Even in a unified world under a single state, we would have asymmetrical wars, as they're referred to today.

In short, even if traditional warfare did disappear, it is unlikely that other types of bloody conflicts would disappear. Unless genetic engineering managed to do away with our belligerent genes, assuming they exist... But the war drive has been fundamental to the survival of *Homo sapiens* insofar as it has generated not only war, but what I would call the polemical creativity of humanity. Competition in all fields – even religious, philosophical, artistic... – has always fuelled the evolution of thought. The ability to tolerate horror has led not only to bloody battles, but also to fine acts and arts: hunting in primitive societies, surgery, medical care, exploration... The risk exists that an excessive cleansing of the components of the warlike impulse (competitiveness, irascibility, defiance of danger, attraction for the horrific) could lead to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the baby being in this case the mainspring of human inventiveness, its creative aggressiveness.

In conclusion, an ultimate overcoming of bloody conflicts is highly unlikely. And perhaps not even desirable. Which does not alter the fact that, within the myopic times of our individual lives, we can and must strive for peace. After all, war has always been something of a *final resort* to solve conflicts; what we can do is to make it more and more *final*, increasingly rare. Asymptotically rare. War may not disappear, but it may thin out, like prime numbers in the series of natural numbers: as you go on in the series they become

rarer and rarer. But there will always be some. The difference, however, is in the fact that the life of the human species is not infinite, so neither will the thinning out of wars be infinite.

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Notes:

[1] As he had shown a few years earlier in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Civilization and Its Discontents).

[2] This is why it is incorrect to say that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a violation of international Law, for the simple reason that the latter does not exist. It is rather the violation of agreements or conventions between states, which is something different.

[3]“*Wir sind Pazifisten, weil wir es aus organischen Gründen sein müssen*” (Freud, 1933b, p. 25).

[4] We have notable exceptions to this: some wars are triggered to last for a long time, even centuries... This was the meaning of Saddam Hussein's famous sentence at the beginning of the First Gulf War (1991), "the mother of all battles". This conflict against the West was the matrix stage of a very long series of wars against the Judeo-Christian world.

[5] Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar has long shown that languages can vary greatly in their outward forms, but that the deep syntactic structure is identical for every language.

[6] Even if in Europe we are outraged by the support of many Americans for uncontrolled access to all firearms, it has to be said that this support has deep ideal foundations: it stems from the idea that a free people is an armed people, one that knows how to defend itself without relying entirely on its own army. An idea not far removed from the Leninist concept of a proletarian militia.

[7] In primitive hunter-gatherer societies, women gather and men hunt. Often men also gather, but women never hunt.

[8] Indo-European societies tend to be structured according to the three functions of clergy, warriors and workers. Plato's innovation is to replace the clergy with the philosophers. But the important aspect is that Plato does by no means exclude warriors: the perfect Republic also needs to be defended.

Bio:

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