



The Fallacies and Inhibitions of the Present War

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Speaking of war is never an easy matter. War with its atrocities, its ever increasing violence falls outside the bounds of rational thinking. It is irrational *par excellence* (despite political claims of purpose and, therefore, sanity). It is the only thing, perhaps, that defies even the most perverse imagination, since it has nothing to do with Reason (as well as the foundations of law). War is what turns one into an object, be that a simple military target (no longer a “human being”) or a manipulated spectator — since we, witnesses of war at a safe distance, are all turned into indignant, compassionate or, otherwise, apologetic spectators of a TV event in the making (along with the one that is taking place in actual fact). A manipulated spectator is not only the victim of state propaganda. He or she is manipulated by his or her emotion which, it is true, may to a certain extent be induced. So, if one wishes to speak of war, one has to adjust to the demands of a rationality that is on the side of the affective. How can this be done, and, on a more general level, what makes us, distant spectators, so emotional, i.e. what is this quality that so strongly disturbs?

A feeling of helplessness, which has a double meaning: there seems to be no way you can intervene, or change the sequence of events that are unfolding according to an inhuman logic. (Here is where the question comes in: what are those instances [for lack of a better designation] that stand behind the events? Who decides and who evaluates the decision, imposing a uniform version of war on the public at large? Surely, those are not just single people with the all too familiar names. But if we admit, along with many intellectuals, that they are the forces of international capital, does it really help us *locate* the source of danger?, though this may be perfectly true.) And then you are helpless in the face of something that can never be comprehended but is accepted only as a fact: war documentaries (but usually of long since finished wars) show mutilated bodies, bodies reduced to skin and bones, no longer human bodies, but meaningless trophies of war. How could it possibly have happened? But we are quick to explain it off by referring to “regimes” and their “brutalities.” How can it happen again, how can it *continue happening*, despite the suffering of millions and the so-called lessons taught by the war? We are indeed helpless before the fact that extermination has been closely wedded to civilization and that man has learned to

comply with it. We are helpless before the other in ourselves, that terrible other who no longer has any discernible face.

Someone may object: this war, the war that has not yet been named but that imbues every word of a seemingly abstract discourse, this war knows no extermination. It is, in fact, a “bloodless war,” according to the official propaganda (a *war* propaganda for that matter, subject to strict censorship, i.e., lies and omissions). A war conducted against inhuman targets — the infrastructure of a military machine — is it by definition not “humane”? A war that keeps presenting itself as *anything other than war*, a mere defense of human rights, this collective and truly international undertaking? A war that continually shows itself off — indeed a show to be watched and nothing more? But such are the pretenses. This war is a *real* war despite its technological novelty. It is the selfsame extermination (with various parties involved) that renders us so helpless — on the eve of a millennium that has begun with a catastrophe.

A remarkable detail: this war has been shown and reported almost without any casualties. And as for people who obviously did not survive NATO attacks — usually those moving along open roads and the like — their death has been painstakingly transformed into accidents. (Again, by NATO strategists. But what about the suffering side? Why is this side so unwilling to declare numbers of the wounded and the killed, why does it refrain from giving “the other side of the story”? Perhaps because the latter is itself split into two distinct stories: that of the victim [on the international level] and of the internal aggressor. Another form of extermination — of one people by the other — is also carefully concealed.) What a simple reasoning: something may always happen on the road, accidents occur “naturally” when you are part of the traffic — even if it is a primitive string of refugee carts. Casualties in this war are cynically referred to as “mistakes,” “mistakes” that are immediately and often crudely covered up: the NATO pilot “thought” a group of fleeing Albanians were Serbian troops. Extermination is allowed no place in the image of this war, it has been banned from all representations. Here is the war on Russian television: a map of Yugoslavia with a voice reporting news from Belgrade, a night sky ablaze with fire, demolished plants and bridges, refugee camps, hospital inmates and rare victims forever bound to the road. But still less of war in the Western mass media: war replaced by its technological parameters — computer screens, planes and helicopters along with press-conferences held by NATO strategists. Their discourse deserves independent examination, being a discourse of tasks and orders — no interpretations, no speculations about the future which undermines all military definitions.

For the time of war is necessarily that of the present, despite “stages” that may be part of its conception. But a war never takes place tomorrow, it is happening *now*. It is happening at this very moment when one tries to think of it, when one thinks of it no more. Its accomplished totality is truly paralyzing. This is another dimension of war that makes one so helpless. A truth that affects me and that I cannot endure, and therefore, retain every second. An evasive truth. Or, to be more exact: a truth one is incapable of living up to, an absolute truth. Mechanisms of psychological adaptation shield the reality of war, and translate it into bearable fragments, while its truth is unbearable and its scope is all-encompassing. The truth of war exceeds human judgment and even human emotion. It is the truth of violence that is taking place parallel to your ordinary living, and that in fact splinters this living which it also corrupts. It is the truth of crying immorality intertwined with passive acceptance. There is no secret: when we stop thinking (or feeling), however involuntarily but do accept...

A fatal disturbance: a war being waged here and now which is denied its status. A war no less bloody than any other war which is sold off, however, as an act of highest mercy: we — no longer the people, but the community of newly integrated states — demand that a country be devastated in the name of human rights, or, putting it more decently, punished for its repellent nationalistic policy. But whom does this voice belong to? To NATO member-states? And if the answer is yes, what then accounts for their more than selective politics when choosing a violator to be persecuted? Is it rather not the voice of *Realpolitik*, if the latter could indeed be capable of self-expression? And what then is this peculiar “distribution of forces” that may call for a war here and there? Some contend: we are witnessing the violent emergence of a new world order — quite unlike the one that was established as a result of World War Two. A world order with a single power center, namely the USA. NATO, according to this logic, is becoming the extension of the American military machine, or, rather, its effective (?) replacement. So are we right in suggesting that the demand comes from the United States whose strategic interests are located (also) in the Balkans, and that one single country is imposing its blurred vision on the world with an all too familiar rhetoric at its disposal (a rhetoric that fits into *any* political context)? Are we right to suggest that what is called the new world order is the final collapse of communism with *all* ex-socialist countries being equally “punished” (the punishment consisting in their complete — economic as well as moral — “reforming”)? Does it mean by the same token that ex-communist countries *have lost their own voice* while learning to speak a more acceptable ideological language? What is just as much disconcerting about this war is a sense of lost (political) identity: no one will care to listen to your country if it’s ex-communist. Which means that the new world order is an uneven distribution of power-generated statements: there is one unique demand (to punish the Yugoslav government) but repeated in various ways — from a self-contented demonstration of superior might on behalf of a “freedom-loving” nation (always securely removed from all possible wars) through amazingly collaborative (if not collaborationist) forms of governmental support in “traditional” Europe and up to the same invocations of human rights, perhaps a bit too humble and self-conscious, coming from ex-socialist states (and republics).

Which brings us back to our initial question. There is a personal stake in the raging conflict, perhaps a trauma, and surely a dissociation with one’s own past (however ambiguous). The present war is a matter of both identity and time. The countries united by a righteous motivation are new political entities as well as the very alliance they form. Hence the idea of “limited sovereignty” allowing interference in the internal affairs of independent states. Does it also mean a new pattern of the “internal” and “external,” a new conception of borders? What is this force overcoming state boundaries, providing a different map of the world? Is it, indeed, the impersonal market tied to huge corporations outweighing the powers of states? We feel helpless when it comes to defining the interests involved in this war, since there is something about them that escapes existing explanatory models. The time of Clausewitz is definitely over. Politics seems to be the continuation of war by different means. Of a latent war reshaping the world economically. Or, maybe, it is still too strong a claim to be made? Hand in hand with the identity-identification problem goes a sense of split time. This war has produced a time rupture; parasiting on the present, ousting everything out of the present, it is both timeless and time-constituting. It is timeless as long as it is treated in its actual capacity of Event — from direct extermination to the moral harm done to so many living beings — and it is time-constituting if seen at a distance, within a given sequence of events; if, in other words,

it is turned into History (and story). Carefully avoiding the ineffable, History finds a place for it, or, rather, it represses the former by being as much “outspoken” with respect to it as possible. Such in general are the ways of interpretation. As witnesses of the present war we are caught in this process of doubling: paralyzed by the ineffable, we are “brought back to our senses” as soon as war acquires the contours of a narrative, and it is on this narrative level that a time rupture can be conceived. What has been triggered by the war is *a different history and story*, the presentiment of a new time traditionally associated with the third millennium. A new time truly: values being reevaluated (again).

This war is made acceptable in varying ways. From its primary and “natural” transformation into *the presentable* as such (whereas, by its very nature, it is necessarily beyond representation) to the purely political manipulations with it in the interests of power groups and institutions (both international and national). In the latter case, war is treated in such a manner as to become part of distinct political discourses and is made to serve ideological purposes, often by rivaling forces. In other words, the war brings into relief a whole series of political platforms, providing an easy justification for this or that particular stance. It is integrated into nationalistic and imperialist discourses, it is equally employed in support of the democratic cause. As in my own country where the “body” of war is virtually torn apart by the right and the left, being each time implicitly or explicitly presented as the ultimate argument: God bless the USA for pursuing democratic principles all over the world; international law is not a dogmatic prescription but should be used with respect to each case accordingly; the US invasion should be counterbalanced by a new effective union of the orthodox Slavs. Such are only some of the most dramatic forms of *rhetorical* (i.e. political) *appropriation*. Ripped into these shreds of discourses, transformed into an utterly different reality which is self-containing, the war is dismissed, delayed and displaced. Before our very eyes it is becoming *a form of parlance*, part of either elaborate or, on the contrary, primitive argumentation, but, despite such minor differences, it is no longer given in its terrifying directness. Once again it is separated from its own essence which is that of unmitigated violence.

This war was never named “war” by those who had planned it. “Humanitarian intervention” — that would be the maximum of honesty and falsehood. This war was announced as selective, and indeed selective is its image — of targets seen on the screens of computers (representations doubled by their TV transmission) and of targets hit on the ground (cautiously chosen images of scenes or objects “after the fact”). Nothing shocking. No one to bemoan. And, if there are tears, they are separated from the thing that caused them. A dissected war. A series of fragmented images that are put together so as to say: everything is under strict control, no one is hurt (save for the “mistakes”). Only people taking to the road, lots of people, which was predicted, anyway (and if predicted, therefore accepted as a permissible image long in advance). These people can be coped with — both emotionally and practically (look at the camps made for them, at airplanes sent to take them over to countries, however reluctantly, waiting for them). These yes, but not the others. How many of them, in fact? One thousand and two hundred by the middle of this May? Those others that are never shown, which means *they never existed*. Not only are they slain by the war, but are killed again by silence, dissolving in that very emptiness that underlies all images of the unfolding war — as if we keep missing something essential in them which is undoubtedly there. As if we are persistently denied the time to make a mental blowup, finding — to our horror — that prostrated figure hidden in the bushes. We are never given this time, but instead are rushed onward, following the

sequence of events that precludes any pause, any possible amplification. Just another show or another movie *about* war — produced according to cinema standards.

It is because we sense the truth but never see it, because this truth is more than we can bear and still we learn to bear it, that we are so obsessed by our compliance. There is something markedly immoral in what is recognized as natural: it is “natural” to put up with circumstances, to digress, to forget. It is “natural” to filter information as well as the very impulses coming from the outside world. But whence this feeling of shame in the face of such “naturalness,” and why is one so suspicious about the concept itself? Something tells us (our social memory, perhaps) that it is all too easy and too dangerous to lapse into the “natural” with other people coming to guide you, taking you over in this blissful state. There is nothing less natural than war and its acceptance. War demands that which its own images — from old battle scenes to the latest computer representations — consistently deny: it requires an openness to the suffering other (“be sober, be vigilant,” as the commandment goes). It is the voice of *the-other-in-pain* that never reaches me and keeps resounding in my ears. A muffled voice. A voice lost in the sound of sirens and exploding shells. A voice cut out from all the news reports. A voice that no longer utters words and is yet the most coherent statement about the present war: this omission, this blank, this lacuna is the place of today’s greatest imperative — that the war should be stopped. There is no way to appropriate this voice, to domesticate it: coming out of the suffering body, its last outburst, its shapeless plea, the voice is shattering and it shatters everything around it. It shatters the very order of the visible and the spoken, introducing a fatal crevasse into both: suffering is unrepresentable. We (but who are *we*? So many of “us” distributed along endless lines of shifting identifications) are placed now at the final limit. It is here that rationality collapses, giving way to a new, indeed “materialist,” thinking. And this thinking of the dying voice, a voice still desperately crying in the face of overwhelming silence, is in essence a thinking *against* war.

As time goes by the war is steadily translated into numbers — a peculiar statistics of war. Now we know the amount of bombs dropped on Yugoslavian cities and villages as much as we know the names of those villages and towns. (But why bother about the whole list, if it’s enough to announce in a TV news report that its mere reading would take no less than ten full minutes? Another figure added to the rest.) First, the reality of bombing is substituted with the names of places where it took place, and next — with abstract calculation. It seems, though, that numbers are on the side of accuracy, belonging to the exact sciences endowed with a special prestige. Numbers have an irresistible aura of verisimilitude. Nevertheless, even numbers are traitors, contributing to the ambiguous process of *adapting this war*, of making it in the final outcome acceptable. Which brings to mind the UN commissioners presently evaluating the damage caused throughout the country (“evaluating” means “making inventories,” “calculating,” i.e., being engaged in an *habitual* procedure, no matter how abhorrent the object of calculation actually appears). The point I am making is simple: everything drives us away from war, makes us turn our backs upon it, because it is too difficult, if at all possible, to look into its face. But nothing except this glance gives us the truth of the war, a truth that can neither be rejected nor cunningly postponed. It is our duty to remain alert, troubled by the incalculable trouble that befell the Other and consequently, ourselves.

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