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Apocalypse Now? Politics Between Life and Death

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Politics has a bad reputation among well-meaning people—and not fortuitously. The hideous and even atrocious acts omitted by political leaders-whether deliberately or negligently-are legion, especially in our contemporary age. Observers still endowed with a conscience are rightly repulsed. To escape from politics, people often withdraw into other, presumably non-political arenas-like economics, culture and religion. But the retreat is frequently illusory. We know from experience the closely interlocking character of economics and politics and how wealth can serve as a political tool subjugating people and throwing millions into misery. Nor are culture and religion completely immune from political manipulation and abuse, sometimes with disastrous consequences (according to the old maxim "*corruptio optimi pessima*"). Thus, politics in away is ultimately unavoidable, and this for a simple reason: namely, that politics is ultimately a matter of life and death. Politics can be beneficial and life-preserving, or it can be devastating and destructive. This means: its source or origin is located at the cusp between life and death.

To some extent, politics has always, throughout the centuries, been located at this precarious cusp. But in the past, this cusp seemed to have a built-in balance, tilting in the end toward life. Just like physical nature, life on earth seemed to have a capacity of regeneration, that is, of regenerating itself even after great destructions. This balance can no longer be presupposed in our time. As public intellectual Noam Chomsky has observed, the nuclear age changes everything-because now life on earth as a whole can be totally destroyed, leaving no remnant behind. This is a stark reality which has not yet fully penetrated public awareness. More than a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche coined a phrase which has turned out to be prophetic: "The desert grows" (*die Wüstewächst*). The phrase, meant provocatively, has a peculiar twist: because it says that what grows is precisely the place where nothing grows, namely, the desert-which could very well be our planet after a nuclear catastrophe. Nietzsche adds to the phrase the warning: "Woe to those who make desert grow" [1]! What is most shocking and disheartening in our time is that there are actually people-national leaders and military planners-who promote the nuclear desert or "nuclear winter," pretending that they or their group might be able to "survive." Although they may not actually advocate nuclear war, they push military confrontations to the point where nuclear disaster becomes probable and perhaps inevitable. There are the people who bring "Woe" to the world.

In the following, I want first to draw attention to a warning against nuclear catastrophe issued by a recant European philosopher: Jacques Derrida. Next, I turn to the question of the meaning of politics or "the political," if we take seriously its location at the cusp of life and death. Finally, I explore some implications from these reflections for political praxis.

No Apocalypse, Not Now

The danger of nuclear disaster looms strongly in our contemporary period which some people (not incorrectly) have described as Cold War II. The description inevitably calls back into memory the first Cold War which lasted roughly from 1946 to 1990 and which was dominated by the policy of mutual nuclear "deterrence." The policy always hovered close to the border of hot war-or what was sometimes called "mutually assured destruction." Small wonder that the media and popular imagination at the time were filled with dire forebodings, doomsday scenarios, and Armageddon-like prophesies. People living at the time were exposed to films vividly depicting the horrors of nuclear war and its aftermath: films like "The Day After," "Fail-Safe," "Dr. Strangelove" and many others. Saturated with grim images, many people were dejected and despaired of the possibility of finding an alternative future. However, the dejection was not universal. Some people-mostly policy planners-pretended to find a silver lining, that is, an escape hatch from global destruction. Thus, the founder and director of the Hudson Institute in New York, Dr. Herman Kahn, in a string of publications defended the need to think the "unthinkable," that is, the prospect of a "winnable" thermonuclear war [2]. Not to be outdone, military planners in government also ventured to transgress the "thinkable." Thus, in a classified document of 1982 titled "1984-88 Defense Guidance," the Pentagon postulated that in a future nuclear war the United States not only "must prevail" but would actually be able to prevail given proper planning [3].

Needless to say, the recklessness of these and similar ideas was denounced by some upright journalists and public intellectuals at the time-among them the award-winning author Jonathan Schell (to whom I aim to return a bit later). Somewhat surprisingly, given the academic distance from public affairs, the opposition was also joined by a leading French philosopher: Jacques Derrida. Although usually preoccupied with more esoteric matters, Derrida in 1984 published an essay whose title announced a program: "No Apocalypse, Not Now." In stark language, the essay evoked the danger of nuclear war for "humanity" and the very existence of human life. It is often said, Derrida observed, that in such war "humanity runs the risk of its self-destruction, with nothing left over, no remainder"; and such fear was not groundless. Moreover, the destruction would happen rapidly, almost instantaneously: "A gap of a few seconds may decide, irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity-plus the fate of a few other species." Thus, the stakes of the nuclear age or the "nuclear question" are not marginal affecting only particular features, but touch the core of a humanly experienced world; they are "those of humanity and of the humanities" [4].

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On a more philosophical level, Derrida's essay touched on the peculiar temporal status of nuclear war: its character as a kind of "non-event" which has never happened before and, if it happened, would erase itself as on event. As he stated, nuclear war has "no precedent," because the explosion of American bombs in 1945 "ended a 'classical' conventional war" without triggering a nuclear exchange. Thus, nuclear war at this point is basically not a "real referent" but only a "signified referent," that is, a kind of "rhetorical figure," a "fantasy" or a "fable"-which does not diminish the stark reality of the nuclear danger. For, "who can fail to recognize the massive 'reality' of nuclear weaponry and of the terrifying forces of destruction that are being stockpiled and capitalized everywhere, and that are coming to constitute the very movement of capitalization." Thus, rhetorical figure and actual nuclear war, the fable and the reality are in a difficult way related; they are "perhaps distinct" but "not two separate things." Thus, at the point of the nuclear event or "non-event," one reaches perhaps the juncture where the traditional philosophical conundrum of subject versus object is undermined or upset. Perhaps, Derrida comments, "once one had arrived at the critical place of the nuclear age," one can no longer rigorously distinguish between opinion and knowledge, belief and science, "doxa and episteme." So perhaps, in a Shakespearean vein, it appears that civilization hangs after all on a fable?" [5]

As Derrida adds right away, none of the preceding philosophical reflections in any sense reduce the stark danger of a nuclear catastrophe. At this point, his essay takes to task opinions claiming that nuclear war, after all, may not be so bad and that, in case it happened, might be actually "winnable" or survivable. The specific reference in this context is the "Defense Guidance" of 1982 (mentioned before) which stated the Pentagon's policy that, in case of prolonged nuclear war, the United States not only "must" but shall "prevail." Since, at the time of writing the essay, the policy document was not publicly available, Derrida relies to a large extent on an article in the *New York Times* written by a certain Leslie Gelb. As that article noted, the sense of the document hinged to a large extent on the phrase "must prevail." According to Gelb, the American government-then under President Ronald Reagan-clearly "stretched the meaning of deterrence" by implying or suggesting something like nuclear supremacy. Differently put: The government's belief "in being able to actually control a nuclear war once begun and to fight it over a period of perhaps months" was "carried beyond well-established bounds." For such a belief could induce a leader to risk "starting a nuclear war" and (more importantly) "actually seeking to win a nuclear war." Once the latter idea was leaked to the media, the government quickly sought to backtrack and camouflage its steps and to muddy the waters. As Secretary of Defense Weinberger announced, the government's policy was only designed "as a way of discouraging the Soviets from thinking they could ever resort to [nuclear weapons]." Nevertheless, in Gelb's view, the suspicion lingered that government leaders "had something in mind when choosing that word 'prevail'," namely, that in case of nuclear war the United States was prepared "to fight, survive, and win it" [6].

In commenting on this domestic American debate, Derrida is quick to debunk the facile rhetoric of "prevailing," "winning" and "surviving"-a rhetoric completely oblivious of the terminal character of a global nuclear war. What must not be forgotten, he notes, is "the uniqueness of nuclear war," its "being-for-the-first-time and perhaps for-the last-time," its status as a referent to "the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive" (that is, of the traditions of law, science, and the arts). In an intriguing aside, Derrida discloses the subtle connection of his philosophical outlook, frequently labeled "deconstruction," with the nuclear scenario: "The hypothesis of total (nuclear) destruction watches over deconstruction, guiding its footsteps. . . . That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age." Extending the connection to classical (Husserlian) phenomenology, he adds: "The nuclear age is not an epoch, it is the absolute *'epoché* [bracketing]; it is not absolute knowledge and the end of history, but the epoché of absolute knowledge." Returning to the issue of nuclear war, he stresses again its character as a non-event, as an unlivable end of life, as the opposite of a "human habitat" or abode. Seen as a terminal referent, such war stands for a catastrophe that would "irreversibly destroy the entire human archive and symbolic capacity," thus destroying "the 'movement of survival', what I call survivance, at the very heart of life [7].

In the conclusion of his essay, Derrida turns to the question of the point or purpose of nuclear war, of the possible end or goal sought to be achieved in such war. Differently put, the question is: in the name of what would such a war be fought? But clearly, terminal destruction could not be pursued in the name, say, of progress, freedom, emancipation or universal happiness. Hence, Derrida concludes that such war could only be fought for its own sake, for the sake of destruction. "Nuclear war," he writes, "is the name of the first war which can be fought in the name of the name alone, that is, of everything and nothing." No doubt, he continues, in the face of "a remainderless destruction, without mourning and symbolicity," those who contemplate launching such a catastrophe will do so "in the name of what is worth more in their eyes than life ('better dead than red')," that is, something which "giving its value to life, has greater value than life itself." On the other hand, those who want to have nothing to do with that catastrophe "are ready to prefer any sort of life at all, life above all, as the only value worthy to be affirmed." Thus, there is here a duel of life and death (*mors et vita duello*); for the advocates of war, the protagonist clearly is death. In Derrida's words: "That war would be the first and the last war in the name of the name, with only the non-name of 'name'. It would be a war without name, . . . a nameless war in the name of the name. That would be the end and the revelation of the name itself, the apocalypse of the name" [8].

More Apocalyptic Politics

The pursuit of mayhem "in the name of the name" has not abated or come to an end. Barely two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new confrontation—often styled "Cold War II"-has emerged between East and West, with the latter now represented by a vastly enlarged North Atlantic alliance stretching its tentacles toward the very border of its geopolitical rival. As in the earlier case, the antagonism is fueled (at least on one side) by the employment of moralizing and quasi-religious rhetoric, reminiscent of the slogans of "Evil Empire" and "Axis of Evil." As before again, efforts are afoot to camouflage the recklessness of the undertaking by presenting nuclear war, if it occurs, as somehow manageable or even "winnable"-although the latter idea is not so much stated as insinuated between the lines. What renders the camouflage urgent or imperative for policy-makers is the need to preserve the presumed "telos" of warfare, its role in the service of a greater good to be achieved. Without this protective veneer, nuclear war-as Derrida has pointed out-would emerge in its stark, pointless actuality: as a war without name, as a catastrophe perpetrated in the name of the name.

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To a considerable extent (as indicated), the desire for Armageddon is animated by a moralism run amuck, an apocalyptic zeal oblivious of consequences (after the motto "*fiat justitiapereat mundus*"). As one should realize, however, moralism in public policy is chiefly meant for public consumption and rarely a serious concern-the latter being anchored in self-interest. Hence, warfare for policy-makers is basically the result of a clash of interests-on the international level: a clash of collective (national or ethnic) interests. To that extent, the behavior of political leaders resembles the conduct of people inhabiting a pre-civil and pre-legal condition-a condition vividly described by British philosopher Thomas Hobbes as a "state of nature" or else a state of "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra comnes*). Hobbes's portrayal-it is important to note-was not based on empty speculation, but (at least in part) on concrete experience garnered during the British civil war and the onset of the religious wars on the European continent. In this portrayal, people in the state of nature are basically caught in a stark existential self-contradiction: in the sense that their unlimited pursuit of self-interest-a pursuit meant to enhance life-ultimately conjures up the prospect of violent death. In this respect, Hobbes ranks as the most profound and most important modern political thinker: far from revolving around secondary embellishments or accessories, political life in his account is rooted in the life and death struggle or else the "duel" between life and death.

The significance of Hobbes's work is not always properly recognized in the literature (where it is often eclipsed by later "liberal" thinkers). Even when it is so recognized, it is not always properly interpreted and understood. A prominent example in this regard is the work of the German political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt, author of a widely known and influential study on Hobbes's *Leviathan* [9]. In this study, Schmitt placed the accent chiefly on the notion of political "sovereignty," that is, the ultimate power of a sovereign ruler over life and death (a power operating in both domestic and foreign arenas). With this accent, the enmity prevailing in the Hobbesian "state of nature" was in away elevated to a collective and rationally more sophisticated level. The implications of this approach were spelled out in another, still more influential text titled The *Concept of the Political,* where Schmitt defined the "essence" of politics in general as the distinction between "friend and enemy," between the preservation of self-interest and the counter-force of alien interests. In line with the general life-death nexus, the "enemy" or alien opponent was designated as someone who rightly could be killed [10]. Although widely supported and endorsed, Schmitt's account suffers from two serious drawbacks or mistakes. First of all, the account neglects or sidelines the distinction between the pre-civil or "natural" condition and the contractually established civil state or "commonwealth"-a distinction central to Hobbes's work. Secondly and more importantly, the account by passes or sidesteps the aspect of the existential self-contradiction which, for Hobbes, serves as the gateway from the natural to the civil mode of life.

More than any other flaw, this sidestepping has a grim and quasi-apocalyptic consequence: rooted in the conflict between friend and enemy, the very meaning or "essence" of political life confers rightness and legitimacy to warfare, killing, and destruction-or at least makes them a matter of discretionary decision. Any effort to curb or curtail warfare and lethal enmity, from this angle, seems to be an arbitrary interference with the "nature" of politics. As is clear, warfare and destruction do not limit themselves; selfish pursuits tend to run amuck until they reach the force of counter-destruction-which, in our global age, is likely to be too late. In a global scenario depicted as "mutually assured destruction," mayhem is likely to engulf not only one of the opponents but the very possibility of life itself. What is completely missing in the Schmittian account is the seasoning role of a learning experience, especially of learning "the hard way" (*patheimathos*). The latter is precisely what is happening in the Hobbesian "state of nature" where people-constantly exposed to the threat of violent death-discover quite spontaneously that there must be a better way to live. Thus, caught in the trap of unrestrained violence, people begin to search for another, a civil or "good life," a search guided by both inclination and rational deliberation [11]. Curiously, this aspect of learning "the hard way" was also invoked by Immanuel Kant in his search for perpetual peace. As he wrote: "Confronted by the sorry spectacle not only of those evils which befall mankind from natural causes, but also of those which men inflict upon one another, our spirits can be raised by the prospect of future improvements. This, however, calls for unselfish good will on our part" [12].

Carl Schmitt's definition of politics-and his erroneous interpretation of Hobbes-has exerted a pervasive influence on recent political thinking in the West, and this virtually on all sides of the political spectrum (I shall return to this point shortly). The most direct and most detrimental impact, however, can be detected on a movement which frequently is labeled "neo-conservatism" (and is often allied with economic "neo-liberalism"). Following Schmitt's reading of Hobbes, neo-conservatives place the main accent on sovereign prerogative, that is, on the unrestricted decision-making power of public rulers (at least in the last resort). This power finds a major application in foreign affairs-where it means the unlimited "right" to wage war-but it also penetrates into domestic relations. In both external and domestic arenas, the Schmittian definition of politics holds sway: in the sense that politics means the attempt to triumph over "enemies" by neutralizing, subjugating, or eliminating them. Again, existential self-contradiction is completely shunted aside: individual and collective self-interest is pursued without restraint (Hobbes called it *ius ad omnia*) quite irrespective of the consequence of widespread death and destruction. The possibly apocalyptic character of such a policy in the nuclear age is obvious. Viewed in this light, the label "neo-conservatism" appears wholly misleading. While normally the term might be construed as an effort to preserve life and what is "good" in life, the actual policies of neo-conservatives-following the friend/enemy motto-tend to result in large-scale slaughter and death.

Struggling for the Good Life

Schmitt's work has been favorably received not only by neo-conservatives, but also by thinkers on other sides of the political spectrum (including democratic and "New Left" thinkers). Typically, a certain fondness for "*agon*" (struggle) and agonistics has been a motivating factor of this reception. What is often neglected, however, is a constitutive feature of these terms. As used by the ancient Greeks as well as by Friedrich Nietzsche, *agon* is not a friend-enemy conflict where the enemy can be killed, but rather a contest between roughly equal partners whose continued viability and strength is a precondition of the contest. Differently put: agon is not a struggle to promote death but an effort to promote life, preferably a life of excellence (or "good life")-as exemplified in the great Olympic games. In a vintage passage in his *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche speaks of the desirable "spiritualization of hostility," a transformation which consists in "a profound appreciation of the *value* of having enemies" (that is, the

value of keeping opponents as opponents). As he adds, in the political realm too, "hostility has [or should] become more spiritual—much more sensible, more thoughtful, more considerate. Almost every party understands that it is in the interest of its own preservation that the opponent should not lose all strength"[13].

Partly following Nietzsche's lead, Martin Heidegger also appreciated the role of struggle and *agon*, but never in the sense of destructive enmity. In his presentation, *agon* or rift (*Streit*) presupposes precisely a shared bond between contending elements or parties; otherwise their difference or distinctiveness would vanish into mutual indifference. This aspect is quite evident in his account of the "art work" which links together "world" and "earth," open disclosure and sheltering concealment. As we read in his famous lecture on that topic: "The counterpoint (*Gegeneinander*) of world and earth is a strife. But we would surely falsify its nature all too quickly if we were to confound strife with discord and dispute and thus identify it with disorder and destruction." Rather, the two elements essentially "belong together" (zusammengehören) in the "unity" of the art work. To be sure, unity here is not a facile synthesis or an "insipid agreement" which would terminate the struggle or *agon*. What happens, instead, is that in strife the contestants incite each other to the highest performance; they "elevate each other" to the assertion of their basic "distinctness"—a distinctness which, however, never decays into the rigid insistence upon a fixed identity, but always remains open to further mutual engagement. Thus, in the *agon*, the contestants are "carried beyond themselves." The more this is the case, the more the *agon* achieves the unity of the work, that is, the condition where strife "arrives at its high point in the simplicity of mutual intimacy" (*imEinfachen der Innigkeit*). As Heidegger concludes, strife is "the continuously self-excelling gathering of the work's movements. The repose (*Ruhe*) of the accomplished work derives from this intimacy"[14].

To be sure, Heidegger's philosophy does not avoid or bypass reflections on death. As is well known, his *Being and Time* (1927) contains a sustained discussion of human "being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*)—a fact which has earned him the accusation of morose or life-denying tendencies. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For Heidegger, "being-toward-death" serves basically as a wake-up call alerting human existence (*Dasein*) to the need to live life more carefully, caringly and "authentically." This wake-up call is possible because, among all beings, human existence has the unique capacity to anticipate its death or ending and to allow this anticipation to serve as a seasoning leaven in the conduct of life. As we read in *Being and Time:* "Death in the widest sense is a phenomenon of life." In the case of human life, "death his a possibility-of-being which Dasein has to shoulder in each case," namely, as "the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be." In anticipating death, "*Dasein* discloses itself as essentially being ahead-of-itself," which serves a guidepost for "care" (*Sorge*). As one can see, death in Heidegger's discussion is not only not life-denying, but has a life-enhancing and elevating quality; soberly shouldered by human *Dasein*, "authentic" anticipation of death even has an emancipatory or liberating quality. In his words: "Cultivated in an authentic manner, anticipation does not evade the fact that death cannot be transgressed or bypassed (unüberholbar); instead, it frees *Dasein* for accepting this fact. When, in anticipation, one becomes free for one's own death, one is liberated from one's accidental and contingent possibilities, in such a manner that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among life's possibilities." Thus, "anticipation discloses the ultimate mode of *Dasein's* self-surrender (*Selbstaufgabe*) and shatters any insistence on a given identity"[15].

Basically, in Heidegger's work, being-toward-death serves as a "*memento mori*"; it signals by no means an orientation or goal to be achieved (since death is the end of achievable possibilities). This "*memento*" is particularly urgent in our present time-an age faced with the possibility of an apocalyptic ending of human life as such. As indicated before, the danger of catastrophe is palpable and real, given that there are geopolitical forces at work actively pushing for Armageddon. Fortunately, there also prudent voices speaking out against the unleashing of insanity, voices denouncing the atrocious self-contradiction involved in the conduct of those who-as their basic life-project-pursue the termination of all possible life-projects. For a long time, one of these voices has been Jonathan Schell, a writer for *The New Yorker* and long-time fellow at the "Nation Institute" who passed away recently (in 2014). Particularly memorable from the period of the first Cold War is his book *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) where he stipulated three main requisites for the survival of humankind: "respect for human beings . . . based on our common love of life and our common jeopardy in the face of our own destructive powers and inclinations"; "respect for the earth"; and "respect for God or nature, or whatever one chooses to call the universal dust that made or became us"[16].

From that time forward, Schell has not ceased to warn humankind of the looming dangers. From the period of the invasion of Iraq-and the gathering storm in the Near East-one needs to remember especially his book *The Unconquerable World. Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (2003) which contains these stirring lines:

Fifty-eight years after Hiroshima, the world has to decide whether to continue on the path of cataclysmic violence charted in the twentieth century and now resumed in the twenty-first, or whether to embark on a new cooperative path. . . . The cooperative power of nonviolent action is new, but it roots go deep in history, and it is now tightly woven into the life of the world. In the century ahead, it can be our bulwark and shield against the still unmastered peril of total destruction [17].

Competing Interests

The author declare that he has no competing interests.

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