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Between whispers of peace and roars of war: reflections on education and conflict in the contemporary world

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Abstract: This article examines the interaction between historical, pedagogical, and theoretical notions of peace and war. Structured into three main sections, it initially explores the history of values such as peace, freedom, and justice. It then delves into the "ethics of war," exploring how moral principles clash with warlike inclinations in human nature. Lastly, it considers the figure of the peace advocate, crucial in the foundation of a society governed by universal ethical values. The essay criticizes the contemporary trend of marginalizing the teaching of nonviolence and fairness, highlighting the urgency to strengthen commitment towards a global culture of peace. Through a comparison of historical theories and modern practices, it invites a revaluation of educational competencies towards peace in the age of contemporary conflicts and stresses the need for both collective and individual involvement in promoting peace.

Keywords: Peace, Education, Ethics, Conflict, Nonviolence.

Abstract: Questo articolo esamina l'interazione tra le nozioni storiche, pedagogiche e teoriche di pace e guerra. Strutturato in tre sezioni principali, esplora inizialmente la storia di valori come la pace, la libertà e la giustizia. Successivamente si addentra nell'"etica della guerra", indagando come i principi morali si scontrino con le inclinazioni belliche della natura umana. Infine, prende in esame la figura del promotore di pace, cruciale nella fondazione di una società guidata da valori etici universali. Il saggio critica la tendenza contemporanea a marginalizzare l'insegnamento della nonviolenza e dell'equità, sottolineando l'urgenza di rafforzare l'impegno verso una cultura globale della pace. Attraverso un confronto tra teorie storiche e pratiche moderne, invita a una rivalutazione delle competenze educative per la pace nell'epoca dei conflitti contemporanei e insiste sulla necessità di un coinvolgimento sia collettivo sia individuale nella promozione della pace.

Parole chiave: Pace, Educazione, Etica, Conflitto, Nonviolenza.

The culture of war heroism and indoctrination into conflict

The great philosophical and theological syntheses—from Augustine to Vico, from Herder to Bossuet—have interpreted the ever-changing flow of history as a golden design of improvement and educational elevation of humanity as a whole: «In the immense span of history, a value still transcends it, an inexhaustible and ever-exceeding soul of the synthesis in which it consists» (Battaglia, 1948)[1].

Today, this vision is lacking, and it seems that all of history is missing along with its hermeneutics.

The history we are missing—the history book we have yet to write, as Pietro Roveda (1990) reminded us—concerns precisely the immense depth of the force of values, which, slowly and persistently working at the everyday level, have made, especially the postwar years, the most revolutionary (Arnaldi, 1989, p. 4).

But what are these values?

Peace, justice, or freedom?

In 1990, the renowned epistemologist Evandro Agazzi wrote in Nuova Secondaria that «the belief that values drive history is certainly not new, just as the opposite belief—that history is made by violence or, at the very least, by power relations—is not new either. In reality, history is a mixture of the most diverse factors» (Agazzi, 1990, p. 4). But he went on to warn us of the foundational value: «In our century, we had increasingly resigned ourselves to the idea that history is determined by power relations and violence, but now we have more reasons to break free from this resignation and to realize that building a planetary civilization of peace, based on the committed practice and convinced proposition of great ethical, social, and political values, is not only a possible undertaking, but one with promising prospects for success» (*Ibidem*).

That was 1990, and we had just emerged from the fall of the Berlin Wall, which had the effect of a historical detonation, opening up the enduring hope for a possible and achievable future of peace.

Seventy years ago, the philosopher Bertrand Russell proposed to Albert Einstein that they jointly sign a public declaration calling for disarmament.

Russell drafted a statement, which Einstein then shared with other leading scientists. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist signed it on April 11, 1955—exactly one week before his death, on April 18. The Einstein-Russell Manifesto, made public in July of that same year, would become his final and most urgent appeal for disarmament.

In the Manifesto, Einstein, Russell, and the other signatories raised what they called

> «the paramount issue of our time, a question as vital now as it was then: We have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is: 'What steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?'» (Russell, 1955).

If the stakes involved in abandoning militarized thinking were not yet sufficiently clear, the Manifesto made them explicit with an uncompromising alternative: «This is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?» (*Ibidem*).

At that time, it was not the perverse logic of deterrence that saved humanity, but rather the long and difficult process of disarmament.

While it did not lead to a permanent renunciation of war, it did initiate a path of détente between East and West, eventually culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is true: without attention to ideals, our vision of the world and of history remains limited, despite its presumed claim to scientificity, which in any case excludes the metaphysical-theological dimension.

Yet, if we turn to the scale of values, we see a markedly different response from an undisputed master of political philosophy, Norberto Bobbio (1989, p. 82), who, with a robust synthesis, indicated that the

[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations from Italian are the author's own. Titles of works without official English translations are given in the original.

essential values at stake in recent and future history are essentially two: freedom and justice: «I understand my initial and never-abandoned liberalism as the theory that holds that the rights of freedom are the necessary (even if not sufficient) condition of any possible democracy, including socialist democracy (if ever it will be possible)».

Whatever the hierarchy of values may be, in the realm of convincing and shared ideals, it seems that the path to be taken is still, unfortunately, a long one.

Western culture has in fact lingered over the nihilisms of the past and the weak thoughts of the present, in spite of the evident, inescapable, and urgent demands for fullness and completeness posed by humanity.

A horizon of thought emptied of ideals inevitably becomes either apolitical or populist in the degenerate sense of the term (Taguieff et al. 2003) and a culture of values silenced in the pursuit of trends and influencers instead of true mentors (Zagrebelsky, 2019) leads to the construction of micro-values valid only for a micro-ethics (Scarpa, 2008), to individualism, materialism, and selfishness, to the concealment of integral truth, to indifference and boredom, to the exaltation of a freedom without responsibility (Bussola, 1995), to the supremacy of rights in a vacuum of duties, to the reduction of love in favor of individual, familial, and social hedonism, to the practical defense of injustice, to racism toward all forms of diversity, and to the absence of a shared ideal project (Perucca & Simone, 2012).

All of this undermines justice, freedom, but above all, peace—because it takes us back to a world built on division, on walls, and on mistrust.

Even if this world were at peace (which it is not), it would only be able to claim a peace maintained by arms, while the ideal universe of coexistence calls for and demands a peace without arms (and even conceptual, discriminatory, selfish, and narcissistic weapons are still weapons).

This is the distinction between negative peace and positive peace.

The transition from one to the other appears possible through the dismantling of walls and the life-giving presence of shared, human-centered values.

Just as every war demands reconstruction, so too does the negative peace we have experienced and continue to endure—by adapting ourselves to the oxymoron of armed peace—urgently call for reconstruction upon a foundation of value-based planning. Without this, every human achievement (think of the scientific and technological conquests) remains like an unfinished and unstable stilt house. The question of values is not secondary. According to the Kantian posture, values originate and find their natural place precisely in the heart of the human being:

> «Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek them as if they were veiled in obscurity or as if they lay beyond my horizon in the transcendent; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence» (Kant, 1788/2015).

Here, what we might call the "front of conscience" begins to take shape, standing in opposition to the dismal trenches of war.

The history of humanity counts many martyrs who fell on this front of conscience—but not in vain.

From Giacomo Matteotti, of whom Ignazio Silone (1936/1986) wrote in Bread and Wine that «he is dead. But now no one can silence his corpse», to Martin Luther King «killed by a single rifle bullet. But all the bullets from all the arsenals in the world could not truly kill him» (King, 1968), to Falcone and Borsellino, whose legacy is still alive and relevant[2], the "front of conscience" is not a remote or utopian realm, but a concrete and real political space.

The world's leading cultural and educational organization, UNESCO - affiliated with the United Nations- states in the Preamble of its Constitution, drafted while the ruins of war were still smoldering, that the catastrophic world war was made possible by the denial of the democratic ideal of dignity, equality, and respect for the human person. It then reminds us of a crucial and concise anthropological

[2] https://www.centrostudilivatino.it/leredita-viva-e-attuale-di-falcone-e-borsellino/

and cultural principle: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed"[3].

This is a clear and authoritative statement that reveals how the front of conscience is the irreplaceable foundation of a peace built by all and for all—an indestructible bastion.

In If This Is a Man, Primo Levi (1959) bears witness to his own trench of conscience, telling us that in the hell of the concentration camp, they could deprive him of everything - his clothes, his food, his dignity - but not his conscience.

And yet, the history of ideas and of recent events has often betrayed the foundations of this profound and lasting peace, attacking them precisely at their source: the human heart and conscience.

We cannot ignore the existence of a hardened - albeit sometimes subterranean and insidious - "philosophy of the bomb" (Laquer, 1977) reproduced systematically in sociological and psychological sciences (Maritain, 1943).

For too long, we have studied, reasoned about, and sometimes even justified the violent humanity and the violent man. In recent years, the development of neuroscience has prompted renewed attention to the biogenetic roots of human action.

Some neuroscientists - so-called hard or radical determinists - claim that the idea of free will is merely a biologically induced illusion.

According to this view, brain structures mechanically determine every human action, including crime.

This neo-Darwinian vision, in certain aspects, revives the materialist bio-determinism of early Lombrosian criminology and its consequent denial of moral responsibility (Martucci, 2013).

In general, many paleoanthropologists and sociobiologists have embraced the idea of an originally violent and cruel human nature, inspired by a model of organic evolution dominated by the ruthless struggle for life, thus fueling the myth of the «killer ape» (*Ibidem*).

Without invoking criminology, even in the realm of social psychology, Maslow (1954) once lamented that «this science ought to be more than just the study of imitation, suggestion, prejudice, hatred, and hostility. In healthy individuals, these forces are of relatively minor importance […] What is lacking is scientific reflection on typical positive social values: a sense of duty, loyalty, obligation toward society, responsibility, social conscience […] We should study the good citizen, the honest person, while we spend all our time trying to understand the criminal. We must study those who fight for principles—for justice, freedom, equality… We know little about saints, about those who do good, about heroes, about altruistic leaders, while we know a great deal about tyrants, criminals, and psychopaths».

At times, as Pietro Roveda (1990) has pointed out, even pedagogy has lingered on mere functionality, aligning itself with negative peace and forgetting the "man/woman of peace".

But who is the man/woman of peace?

Peace represents a social, interpersonal, and political condition (extending also to the individual level or to various spheres), defined by the presence of shared harmony and the simultaneous absence of stress and conflict. The peace that arises between two states after a conflict may originate from the cessation of hostilities through mutual agreement between the involved parties, or it may be imposed—when its persistence is ensured by conditions established by the victorious state, or when one side's dominance prevents any rebellion attempts from the disadvantaged state.

More specifically, peace is considered (or should be considered, according to prevailing opinion) a universally recognized value capable of overcoming all social and/or religious barriers and every ideological prejudice, in order to prevent conflictual situations between two or more individuals, groups, states, or religions. The term derives from the Latin pax, which in turn comes from the Indo-European root pak-, pag-, meaning to fix, agree, bind, unite, consolidate—a root that also gives us words like "pay" (pagare) and "appease" (pacare).

In a political and sociological sense, it is the opposite of bellum (war), that is, in the management of relationships between individuals or groups.

[3] https://www.unesco.it/it/news/lunesco/

As one of the oldest and most profound concepts from an anthropological standpoint, the term has acquired broader and more general meanings, including verbs such as ‘to appease’ and ‘to reconcile’ along with their reflexive forms: ‘to become appeased’ and ‘to become reconciled’.

With further semantic extension, the concept of peace as non-disturbance has shifted from the sociological and political sphere to the personal one in a distinctly psychological sense, taking on the meaning of serenity of the soul or inner peace—that is, a state of calm or tranquility of the human spirit, perceived as the absence of disturbance or agitation.

This inner serenity corresponds to the ancient concepts of euthymia (Democritus), aponia (Epicurus), ataraxia (the Stoics), and eireneusi in more recent ethical systems.

Reversing the narrative: the utopia of peace as educational plausibility

But is this truly the case?

Today, this vision appears decidedly limiting.

Through the teachings of Gandhi and the words of Martin Luther King, the idea of positive peace has developed—not simply as the absence of war, but as the presence of conditions of mutual justice among peoples, allowing each to develop freely under conditions of self-governance.

In these circumstances, peace is much more than the outcome of treaties between governments or agreements between influential individuals, as many believe. Peace derives from the way one people interacts with another, in the respect of mutual rights and duties as recognized by the international community. Thus, it is not the form of government that guarantees peace, nor a set of treaties or international agreements. Peace is ensured solely by the actions and decisions of individuals who collectively form the choices of a people.

Educating oneself in the culture of peace—by becoming informed and aware of the problems and the decisions needed to solve them—is the duty of all who, through various cultural and associative forms, express a will to contribute to the building of global serenity.

Indeed, the Gospel speaks of peacemakers, not of ataraxia, stillness, or inertia.

On the tomb of Maria Montessori in Noordwijk, we read this inscription that captures the essence of her entire educational approach: “I beg the dear, all-powerful children to unite with me for the building of peace in man and in the world[4]”.

The pedagogical question to which Maria Montessori gave a valid answer is precisely that of what kind of education can truly prepare the ground for a peaceful world. It is a question that occupied her entire life.

In 1932, as Italy was becoming an increasingly hostile place to live and work due to the radical changes in the cultural and political climate, and thanks to the growing resonance of her reputation abroad, Maria Montessori did not hesitate to leave the country to preserve her vision of ideal education and society. Her educational approach—founded on the rejection of dogmatism and authoritarianism—could not endure the suppression of freedom being established by the dictatorial regime.

She lived in several European countries before returning to Italy after the fall of fascism and the end of World War II. And while abroad, she witnessed the horrors of war, yet she continued to devote herself—ever more passionately—to the search for universal truths for humanity, arriving at the awareness that peace is an educational task, while politics can only prevent war. In Education and Peace (Montessori, 1972/1949) -which gathers the various lectures she gave on peace, starting with the 1932 Geneva address at the Bureau International d'Éducation (a theme she developed further at the 1936 Brussels European Congress for Peace, in various events in Copenhagen, including the 1937 International Conference, and in her 1939 speech in London at the World Fellowship of Faiths) we clearly find Montessori’s profound capacity to indicate a path to peace through freedom, redemption, and human dignity.

Although she admits it seems «strange and inappropriate in our times, dominated by the cult of ‘specialization,’ to be called to speak about peace» she asserts that if peace were considered a discipline,

[4] Original inscription in Italian: “Io prego i cari bambini, che possono tutto, di unirsi a me per la costruzione della pace negli uomini e nel mondo”.

it would have no equal in importance, for upon it depends the very survival of nations—and perhaps the progress or decline of civilization itself. Yet peace, she continues, can only be achieved through consensus, and there are two tools to reach such harmony: the first is the immediate effort to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence—that is, avoiding war; the second is the continuous endeavor to establish lasting peace among human beings. Education, therefore, assumes an extraordinarily vast significance.

This increase in its practical value can be summarized in one phrase: education is the weapon for peace, and peace must be organized—prepared scientifically—through education, starting with the child, the «neglected citizen» (Ibidem).

It is time, says Maria Montessori, for society to recognize this and to provide the child with an environment suited to their essential needs and spiritual liberation. For the child who has developed a profound love for the environment and for living beings, and who has found joy and enthusiasm in work, offers us the hope that humanity may evolve in a new direction.

The history of culture, including educational culture, seems to have consistently moved in the opposite direction, in an underlying praise of power relations: “If you want peace, prepare for war” is one of the most exploited phrases of classical thought, where war and peace are intrinsically linked—even though the former is always dependent on the latter. History and literature present us with a universe in which war is a tragic norm that, nevertheless, allows individuals to rise as heroes.

In such a narrative context, no one can escape conflict—not even mothers.

One of the masterpieces of the ancient world, The Iliad, is a war epic in which Achilles' mother is powerless to save her son.

A careful analysis of the most well-known literary works—those that place us at the intersection of pedagogical and literary reflection—reveals the traces of a deep and persistent indoctrination into the bellum iustum, where schoolbooks themselves portray heroism and war as the ideal pair.

Within this view, conflict becomes the real instrument of action, while peace is relegated to the realm of utopia.

Play as catharsis: educating for peace through fiction

If this is true—and without depriving ourselves of the beauty of such literature—we might propose an educational solution that overturns the terms of the issue: relegating war to the dimension of fiction and of logical and ontological impossibility, and peace to the dimension of plausibility.

This is the narrative device used by Umberto Eco, who in Lettera a mio figlio in Diario Minimo (1963, p. 120-131) wrote a moving and extraordinarily lucid pedagogical letter to his newborn son, filled with foresight and, at first glance, paradox. He wrote:

> Dear Stefano, Christmas is approaching and soon the downtown shops will be crowded with excited fathers playing the annual comedy of generosity—those same fathers who have hypocritically awaited the moment in which they can buy, disguised as gifts for their children, their own favorite toy trains, puppet theaters, dart games, and home ping pong sets. I will just watch, because this year it’s not my turn yet—you are too small […] Then my turn will come, the phase of maternal education will pass, the teddy bear era will wane, and it will be my moment to shape—with the sweet, sacred violence of patria potestas—your civic conscience. And then, Stefano…
>
> Then I will give you guns. Double-barreled. Repeaters. Machine guns. Cannons. Bazookas. Sabers. Armies of toy soldiers—in full combat gear. Castles with drawbridges. Forts to be besieged. Bunkers, powder magazines, battleships, jet fighters. Machine guns, daggers, revolvers, Colts, Winchesters, Rifles, Chassepots, Garands, howitzers, culverins, mortars, bows, slingshots, crossbows, lead balls, catapults, falaricae, grenades, ballistae, swords, spikes, grappling hooks, halberds, boarding claws […] in short, my son, many weapons—only weapons.
>
> Stefano, my son, I will give you guns.
>
> Because a gun is not a toy. It is the starting point of a game. From there, you must invent a situation, a network of relationships, a dialectic of events. You will have to go bang with your mouth, and you will discover that the game is worth what you put into it, not what you find ready-made.

> You will imagine destroying enemies, satisfying an ancestral impulse that no amount of civilizing beard will ever erase—unless it turns you into a neurotic ready for corporate psychological screening. But you will understand that destroying enemies is a game convention, one game among many, and you will learn that it is a practice foreign to reality—whose boundaries, through play, you will come to know well.
>
> You will cleanse yourself of rage and repression, and you will be ready to welcome other messages—those that contain neither death nor destruction. It will be important, in fact, that death and destruction forever appear to you as elements of fantasy, like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, whom we have all hated without ever developing an irrational hatred for German Shepherds […]
>
> You will vent your instincts […] and as an adult, you will believe it was all a fairy tale—Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, guns, cannons, man against man, the witch against the seven dwarfs, armies against armies.
>
> But if by chance, when you grow up, the monstrous figures of your childhood dreams still exist—witches, goblins, armies, bombs, conscription—perhaps you will have developed a critical awareness of fairy tales and learned to move critically through reality.

War as a game from which one purifies oneself—as a kind of catharsis from early childhood—can be a way to reverse the coordinates so often used and abused in the world. It leads us to ask, not without tragic irony and without descending into psychologism, whether yesterday's and today's warmongers are ultimately driven by the ancient, unmet childhood longing for lead soldiers—through which they could have played war within the bounds of fictio, rather than bringing it to life in the dramatic and real forms we now see around us.

But to this question we may never find an answer, because, as Pascal said, the heart of man is an unfathomable abyss.

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