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DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF WAR
Challenges to Our Common Humanity

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The Kantian vision of perpetual peace

No peace without democracy, no democracy without peace – these were the slogans that inspired many in the peace movement of the last century, especially in the final decades of the Cold War. That era’s “democratic peace theory” saw itself in the legacy of the great philosopher of Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, from Königsberg.¹ In his essay “On Perpetual Peace” [*Zum ewigen Frieden*],² he had explained that only a polity where the citizens have a say as to “whether there should be war or not” [*ob Krieg seyn solle, oder nicht*]³ offers the prospect of peace, namely, genuine peace that is durable and more than a temporary cessation of arms.

Kant identified that system as *republican* – where decisions are made by those who directly have to bear the consequences of their decisions, and not by an aloof and distant ruler who is not personally affected by the devastating effects of war, for instance. The political order Kant described as “republican” (as opposed to a despotic one where there is no separation of powers) in our time is commonly referred to as “representative democracy.”

If we look at the historical facts – the events of the last few decades in particular – we must admit that it was not only “despotic” states, to use the Kantian term, but also states defining themselves as “democracies” who engaged in large-scale wars, indeed a multitude of military interventions that were often justified by references to “democracy,” “human rights,” or the “preservation of peace.” A war to defend peace would indeed be a contradiction in itself. The armed interventions, especially in the years since the end of the Cold War, have destabilized vast regions of the globe and triggered new conflicts that pose serious risks to world peace also in the 21st century.

Was the democratic peace theory – and with it, Immanuel Kant – wrong in the idealistic equation of democracy and peace, we must ask; or is the obvious contradiction between *idea* and *reality* the result of an error in the classification of the respective state systems? In order to bring clarity to the issue, we need to examine the *terminology*, i.e. to reflect on the *notion* of democracy. Only conceptual precision – which is the prerequisite of intellectual honesty – will enable us to identify and understand the challenges to democracy in times of war. These are situations that threaten to undermine the entire edifice of our modern

¹ Now Kaliningrad, in Russia.

² *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf*. Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1795.

³ Chapter II: “*Erster Definitivartikel zum ewigen Frieden*” [First Definitive Article on Perpetual Peace], *op. cit.*, p.

understanding of state legitimacy, which is informed by the ideals of “democracy” and “rule of law.”

Terminology: the principles

The term (by now assimilated into many different languages) was created in ancient Greece. The literal meaning of δημοκρατία is rule of the people, not rule on behalf of the people (or for the people) – although most polities actually defining themselves as “democracy” fall under the latter category. As Rousseau noticed – already before the French Revolution – *direct* rule of the people, as community of citizens, is only feasible when the group is small. In collectives of millions or hundreds of millions, the will of the citizens needs to be expressed via *representation*. By way of elections, the people “authorize” delegates to legislate (for a limited period of time). Ideally, this kind of representation should be exercised in the form of an *imperative* mandate, binding the deputy to the preferences of the electorate as they are expressed in regular elections. In political reality, however, the legislators decide on the basis of an imperative mandate of the political parties or interest groups that have nominated them or sponsored their campaign. Almost unavoidably, this brings in an element of *oligarchy*, often in the form of *plutocracy*, which undermines the very ideal of *popular* rule, albeit in its mediated (indirect) form. In the 20th century, it was President Dwight D. Eisenhower who, in his farewell address of 17 January 1961, warned of the *destructive* effect of vested interests on a democratic polity: “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist ...”⁴

As democracy, for organizational reasons, can only be practiced by way of approximation to the ideal of direct rule by the people, decision-making by way of representation should be strictly independent of lobbies and interest or pressure groups. However, daily practice – also in the Western world – points in the opposite direction. *War*, whether actual or planned (strategically intended), has often in history been the catalyst for the mobilization of these groups, to the detriment of democratic representation that all too often may become a mere assertion or enforcement of interests, which are neither publicly declared nor in any way legitimized by the electorate.

⁴ Quoted from: “Farewell Address,” National Archives / Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/farewell-address>.

To make a proper and honest assessment of the impact of war on democracy (i.e. on decision-making that is meant to conform to the will of the people, whether expressed directly, by referendum, or indirectly, by elections), we must reflect in more detail on the *democratic idea* – and what it implies for the organization of the polity. We speak here of requirements that are *universal* – irrespective of socio-cultural differences – once we have agreed on the principle of *popular rule*. The essence of democracy is *freedom* of the individual as citizen of a state. This freedom is a fundamental human right. The liberty to decide makes only sense (1) if the citizen has access to relevant information (which is the requirement of *transparency*); (2) can shape his/her opinion without being subjected to any kind of manipulation or ideological indoctrination (which excludes all forms of *propaganda*); and (3) can express the *opinion* and assert the *will* (in referenda or elections) free from *fear*.

Democracy and truth

The techniques of “public communication” in support of a war effort were – for the first time in recent history – carefully studied and gradually refined in the course of the First World War. Unavoidably, the mobilization of public opinion in war is antithetic to the requirements of sober and meaningful deliberation in a democracy. Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, with surprising honesty, in today’s terms, described these techniques as the “engineering of consent” of the masses.⁵ In the book entitled “Propaganda” (1928), he authoritatively stated that “[t]he conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.”⁶ It goes without saying that, in view of *our* understanding of democracy, we cannot agree with this assessment. What Bernays describes is an essential aspect, or *modus operandi*, of oligarchy, which is especially pertinent and consequential in a state of war. In the words of Bernays: “Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country” [the United States].⁷ It is exactly what President Eisenhower who, as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War II, had gone through the horrors of war, solemnly warned against. In 2023, the world is again faced with such a threat of undeclared interests.

⁵ “The Engineering of Consent,” in: *The Annals of the American Academy* (1947), pp. 113-120.

⁶ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*. Reprint edition (with an introduction by Mark Crispin Miller): Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2005, Chapter I: “Organizing Chaos,” p. 37.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

As regards the earlier mentioned requirement of any decision that is democratically meaningful – namely, access to *unbiased* information, today’s leaders should also pay attention to the wisdom of Samuel Johnson, the great 18th century English writer. In an essay published in the London weekly “Universal Chronicle,” under the pen name “The Idler,” he wrote: “Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages.”⁸ More simply, the wisdom is expressed in a dictum often attributed to Rudyard Kipling: “The first casualty of war is truth.”

As implied in the *freedom of decision*, there is a vital nexus between *truth* and *democracy*. Meaningful participation in public life is simply impossible if people are denied access to information or are prevented from communicating with citizens on the other side. This has been proven one of the most serious predicaments of democracy under conditions of war. In our global era – with the threat of arms of mass destruction – propaganda and denial of access to information are not merely an impediment to democracy in an abstract sense, but an existential challenge to our common humanity. In a constellation of conflict – such as the one we are faced with in Europe – *democratic prudence*, nurtured by the wisdom of the informed citizen, is all too easily, and quickly, subordinated to, and eventually eliminated by, the *furor of war*. As always in such situations, propaganda attributes the blame exclusively to the other side. To borrow a term from the German language, *Schwarz-Weiss-Malerei* [black-and-white-painting] seems to be the order of the day.

An honest assessment will make us aware that the protagonists on *both* sides of the divide engage in disinformation and what in modern terminology is fashionably described as “hybrid war.” Not only *truth* in its most essential sense, as a core value of democracy, but also the *integrity of culture* is at stake when the emotions of war absorb the rational mind. Blocking access to TV and radio stations or internet sites, excluding people from performing or participating in cultural events and scholarly or academic exchange, in general: victimizing civil society for the sake of war mobilization, is intrinsically antithetical to democratic values.

The resilience of democracy

The *war hysteria* these days here in Europe is an eerie reminder of the mass emotions that accompanied Europe’s stumbling into war more than a century ago. It was too late when the

⁸ *The Idler*, No. 29, Saturday, 4 November 1758, p. 95.

people – including some of the leading German intellectuals of the time such as Thomas Mann, Max Planck, or Max Weber – eventually woke up from their illusions. In our nuclear era, escalating mass emotions, further amplified by the “new social media,” are even more consequential because the survival of humankind may be at stake. As President Kennedy presciently said in his Peace Speech of 1963, a few months before his tragic assassination: it is not enough anymore to think about how to secure peace in our time; in the face of arms of mass destruction, humanity must strive to establish conditions of peace for all time⁹ – or, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “perpetual peace” [*ewiger Friede*]. This can only be achieved if genuine democracy prevails over despotism (as described by Kant), namely if it is able to prevent powerful interest groups from taking an entire state hostage. In a *free republic*, the citizens exercise their will on the basis of an elaborate system of checks and balances, which alone can prevent emotional excesses. When people have direct influence on decisions about war and peace, there is at least still hope that they will not favour any action that jeopardizes their own security and livelihood. What is essential, however, is that no hidden hand manipulates their mind. Edward Bernays’ frank description of the power of what, a century ago, he had defined as “propaganda,” must not be forgotten. In the era of AI [artificial intelligence], the prospects of the “manufacture of consent” are frightening indeed.

Under conditions of conflict and war, such as those right now, not only truth may be a casualty; democracy itself risks becoming a victim of the mass mobilization of emotions. Ethnic hatred, racial prejudice, crude clichés and enemy stereotypes always flourish when nations engage in war. Violent emotions of this kind leave no room for democratic debate or sober deliberation of the state’s options and policies.

Hope in the resilience of democracy will not be enough in such a situation of emergency. In the best democratic tradition, civil society must step up and *challenge the official narrative* on all sides. The appeal recently initiated by Sahra Wagenknecht, a member of the German Parliament, and Alice Schwarzer is an encouraging sign.¹⁰ Where governments fail, *citizen diplomacy* can demonstrate that there are alternatives to prolonged and cruel armed confrontation. This is where the resilience of democracy will actually be put to the test – and where the democratic paradigm can prove its relevance more than in any other context.

⁹ John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *Commencement Address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963*; text published by John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum at jfklibrary.org.

¹⁰ *Manifest für Frieden* [“Manifesto for Peace”], 10 February 2023, www.change.org/p/manifest-für-frieden.

It would be a fateful mistake – and a bad omen for humanity – should the political leaders not pay attention to the by now manifold popular initiatives for peace.

Since the creation of the United Nations after World War II, one of the greatest challenges to our common humanity has been how to establish a system of international relations that takes into account the *interdependence of democracy and peace*. The determination “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours” in the Preamble to the United Nations Charter cannot be interpreted in any other way. While, in times of war, democracy – as we said – is put to the test like in no other situation, democracy is nonetheless the only antidote to the *logic of war*.

In view of the democratic ideal, rooted in the inalienable human right to freedom (individual as well as collective), humankind should not set its hopes merely on the *absence of war* that may result from the more or less rational fear of “mutual assured destruction.” The human race should rather commit itself to genuine – and that means, lasting – peace in the spirit of cooperation among all nations as equals. This is what Immanuel Kant envisaged as “perpetual peace” – and what today’s world order, built on the privileged role of the militarily most powerful countries in the United Nations, is not yet able to deliver.
