



The Silence of the Intellectuals

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*Everybody was taking to the streets of Europe, their little torch in
hand; and now comes the fire.*

Jean Jaurès, July 25, 1914

Six days before being murdered by a militarist fanatic

Intellectuals do not have a monopoly on culture, on values, or on truth, much less on the meanings attributed to any one of these “domains of the spirit,” as they used to be termed. But intellectuals should also not shrink from denouncing what they see as destructive of culture, values, and truth, notably when such destruction claims to be carried out in their name. Intellectuals are not to refrain from saluting the sun before daybreak, but neither should they refrain from warning against the clouds ominously gathering in the sky before nightfall, preventing daylight from being enjoyed.

Europe is witnessing an alarming (re)emergence of two realities that are destructive of the domains of the spirit: the destruction of democracy, brought about by the growth of political forces of the far right; and the destruction of peace, brought about by the naturalization of war. Both destructions are legitimized by the very values each of them aims to destroy: fascism is promoted in the name of democracy; war is promoted in the name of peace. All of this has become possible



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because the political initiative and presence in the media are being relinquished to the conservative forces on the right and far right. Social protection measures aimed at making people feel, both in their pockets and their daily existence, that democracy is better than dictatorship are becoming ever more rare precisely because of the costs of the war in Ukraine, and because the economic sanctions against the “enemy,” which supposedly should be hurting their intended target, are in fact hurting above all the European peoples whose governments have allied themselves with the United States¹. The destruction of peace and democracy is mostly caused by the unequal and parallel drawing of two circles of warranted freedoms, that is to say, of freedoms of expression and freedoms of action endorsed by the political and media powers that be. The circle of the freedoms warranted in the case of the progressive positions that advocate a just and durable peace and a more inclusive democracy is getting smaller and smaller, while the circle of the freedoms warranted in the case of the conservative positions that advocate war and fascist polarization, together with neoliberal economic inequality, does not cease to grow. Progressive commentators are increasingly absent from the major media, while every week conservative ones present us with page after page of staggering mediocrity.

Let us look at some of the main symptoms of this vast process currently underway. First, the information war over the Russia-Ukraine conflict has so taken hold of published opinion that even commentators with a modicum of conservative common sense have submitted to it with sickening subservience. Here’s an example among many from the European corporate media: during his weekly appearance on a Portuguese TV channel, a well-known commentator, usually a voice of common sense within the conservative camp, said something to this effect: “Ukraine has to win the war, because if it doesn’t, Russia will invade other European countries” (SIC, January 29, 2023). This is pretty much what American television viewers hear from MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow on a daily basis. Where does such an absurd idea come from, if not from an overdose of misinformation? Have they forgotten that post-Soviet Russia sought to join NATO and the EU but was rebuffed; and that, contrary to what had been promised to Gorbachev, NATO expansion on Russia's borders may constitute a legitimate defense concern on the part of Russia, even if the invasion of Ukraine is indeed illegal, as I myself repeatedly denounced from day one? Don't they know that it was the United States and England who boycotted the first peace negotiations shortly after the war broke out? Have the commentators not considered, even for a moment, that a nuclear power that found itself faced with the possibility of defeat in a conventional conflict might resort to its nuclear weapons, which in turn could lead to nuclear catastrophe? Don’t they see that two nationalisms, one Ukrainian, the other Russian, are being exploited in the war in Ukraine to force Europe into total dependence on the United States and to stop the expansion of China, the country with which the United States is really at war? Don’t they realize that today’s Ukraine is tomorrow’s Taiwan? Curiously enough, no details are ever offered, in the midst of all this ventriloquistic

¹ On the resilience of Russian economy see: <https://www.les-crises.fr/industrie-russe-comment-expliquer-la-resilience-face-aux-sanctions-jacques-sapir/>

propaganda fever, regarding what is meant by defeating Russia. To oust Putin? To balkanize Russia?

Second, the anti-communist ideology that dominated the Western world until the 1990s is being surreptitiously recycled to promote anti-Russian hatred to the point of hysteria, even though it is a known fact that Putin is an autocratic leader, a friend of the European right and far right. Russian artists, musicians, and athletes are being banned, even as courses on Russian culture and literature—which are no less European than French literature and culture—are terminated. In the wake of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, with its strategy of humiliating Germany after World War I, German writers were barred from attending the first meeting of PEN International, held in May 1923. The only dissenting voice was that of Romain Rolland, who had won the 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature. Despite everything he had written against the war and German war crimes in particular, Rolland had the courage to say, “in the name of intellectual universalism”: “I will not subject my thinking to the tyrannical and demented fluctuations of politics.” (Rolland 1935: 58).

Third, democracy is being so emptied of content that it can be instrumentally defended by those who use it in order to destroy it. At the same time, those who serve democracy to strengthen it against fascism are labeled radical leftists. At the international level, the West unanimously applauded the 2014 events of Kiev's Maidan Square, which is where the current war truly began. Despite the fact that the flags of Nazi organizations were in plain sight during the protests; despite the fact that popular rage was directed against a democratically elected president—Victor Yanukovich; and despite the fact that, according to wiretaps, Victoria Nuland, the U.S. neoconservative, had explicitly named the people who were to wield power in case of victory—including an American citizen, Natalie Jaresko, who eventually became Ukraine's new Minister of Finance; despite all this, these events, which amounted to a well-orchestrated coup aimed at removing a pro-Russian president and turning Ukraine into a U.S. protectorate, were celebrated throughout the West as a vibrant victory for democracy. In fact, none of this was quite as absurd as the fact that when Juan Guaidó, a Venezuelan opposition deputy, proclaimed himself interim President of Venezuela in a Caracas square in 2019, it was enough for the United States, along with many EU countries, to recognize him as such. In December 2022, the Venezuelan opposition itself put an end to this farce.

Fourth, the double standard for assessing what happens in the world is taking on aberrant proportions and is being used in quasi-automatic fashion to strengthen the war apologists, stigmatize the parties of the left, and normalize fascists. Examples are legion, so the difficulty lies in choosing among them. Let me offer just a couple of illustrations from the national and international contexts. In Portugal, the raucous and offensive behavior of the members of Chega, the far-right party, is very similar to the behavior of the deputies of Germany's Nazi party from the moment they entered the Reichstag in the early 1920s. Attempts were made to stop them, but the political initiative belonged to them and the economic situation was on their side. As early as May 1933, they held their first book burning, in Berlin. How long will it be until it happens in Portugal? Largely backed by U.S. counterinsurgency institutions, the position of today's global right *vis-à-vis* leftist governments is that, whenever the latter cannot be overthrown by soft coups,

they must be worn down by accusations of corruption and forced to grapple with issues of governability, so that they are prevented from governing strategically. It would appear that corruption, in Portugal, is confined to the Socialist Party which secured an outright majority in the last elections. In the eyes of the hegemonic conservative media, every minister in the Socialist government is presumed corrupt until proven otherwise. It shouldn't be hard to find similar examples in other countries.

From the international context I will mention two glaring examples. There is now a general consensus that the September 2022 explosion of the Nord Stream gas pipelines was the work of the United States (a promise made by Joe Biden, by the way), possibly assisted by allies. An incident of this magnitude should have been immediately investigated by an independent international commission. What seems obvious is that the aggrieved party—Russia—had no interest in destroying an infrastructure that they could make useless by just turning off the tap. On February 8, Seymour Hersh, a respected American journalist, used conclusive information to show that the sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and 2 had in fact been planned by the United States since December 2021 (Hersh 2023). If that was indeed the case, we are before a heinous crime that is also an act of state terrorism. The United States, who claims to be the champion of global democracy, should be supremely interested in finding out what happened. Was this the only way to force Germany to join the war against Russia? Was the sabotaging of the gas pipelines intended to put an end to Europe's policy, initiated by Willy Brandt, of being less energy-dependent on the United States? In a context of expensive energy and closed-down businesses, was this not an effective way of putting the brakes on the EU's economic engine? Who benefits from the situation? Heavy silence hangs over this terrorist act.

The other example of glaring double standards is the violence of the Israeli colonial occupation of Palestine which is intensifying. Israel has killed 35 Palestinians since the beginning of the year; in a raid carried out on January 26, in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank, Israel killed another 10 people, including two children. One day later, a Palestinian youth killed seven people outside the synagogue of a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, an area illegally occupied by Israel. There is violence on both sides, but the disproportion is overwhelming, and many acts of terrorism by the State of Israel (sometimes committed with impunity by the settlers or by soldiers at checkpoints) do not even make the news. There are no Western media correspondents to report on what is happening in the occupied territories, which is where most of the violence takes place. Except for furtive cellphone footage, we do not have gut-wrenching images of suffering and death on the Palestinian side. The international community and the Arab world keep their mouths shut. Despite the hugely disproportionate means of warfare, there is no movement to send effective military equipment to Palestine, as is currently the case with Ukraine. Why is Ukraine's a just resistance, but Palestinian resistance is not? Europe, the continent where the holocaust of the Jews took place, is ultimately at the root of the crimes committed against Palestine, but nowadays it shares an odious complicity with Israel. The EU is currently hurrying to create a court to try war crimes, but—and herein lies the hypocrisy—only those committed by Russia. Just as in the years leading up to World War I, the appeals to Europeanism (Pan-Europe, as it was

called back then) are increasingly becoming calls to war and rhetoric aimed at concealing the unjust suffering and the loss of well-being now being imposed on the European peoples without their having been consulted on the need for, or advantages of, the war.

Fifth, today, we witness a confrontation between U.S., Russian, and Chinese imperialism. There is also the pathological case of the UK, which, notwithstanding its abysmal social and political decline, has not yet realized that the empire is long gone. I am against all imperialisms and I admit that Russian or Chinese imperialism may prove to be the most dangerous ones in the future, but there is no doubt in my mind that, with its military and financial superiority, U.S. imperialism is at the moment the most dangerous of all. Of course, none of this is enough to guarantee its longevity. In fact, I have been arguing, based on sources from North American institutions (such as the National Intelligence Council), that it is an empire in decline; but it may be that its very decline is one of the factors that help explain why it is especially dangerous these days.

I have condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the start, but since that moment I have also pointed out that the United States had actively provoked Russia into doing it, with the purpose of weakening Russia and containing China. The dynamics of U.S. imperialism seem unstoppable, fueled by the perpetual belief that the destruction it causes, furthers, or incites will take place far from its borders, protected as they are by two vast oceans. Hence its contempt for other peoples. The United States claims that its interventions are invariably for the good of democracy, but the truth is that it ends up leaving in its wake a path of destruction, dictatorship, or chaos. The most recent and probably most extreme manifestation of this ideology can be found in the latest book by the neoconservative Robert Kagan (Victoria Nuland's husband), entitled *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 2022). The book's central idea is that the United States, in its desire to bring greater happiness, freedom, and wealth to other nations, fighting corruption and tyranny wherever they exist, is a unique country. The United States is so prodigiously powerful that it would have avoided World War II if only it had had the chance to intervene militarily and financially in time to force Germany, Italy, Japan, France, and Great Britain to follow the new U.S.-led world order. Every U.S. intervention overseas has been driven by altruistic motives, for the good of the peoples at whom the intervention is directed. According to Kagan, U.S. military interventions overseas—from the time of the Spanish-American War of 1898 (fought with the purpose, still felt to this day, of dominating Cuba) and the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902 (fought to prevent the self-determination of the Philippines and resulting in over 200,000 deaths)—have always been inspired by unselfish notions and for the desire to help people.

This monument to hypocrisy and to the erasure of inconvenient truths does not even consider the tragic reality of the Indigenous peoples and the Black population of the United States, who were subjected to ferocious extermination and discrimination during those times of supposedly liberating interventions abroad. The historical record exposes the cruelty of such mendacity. U.S. interventions have invariably been dictated by the country's geopolitical and economic interests. In fact, the United States is no exception to the rule. On the contrary, this has always been the case

with every empire (see, for example, the invasions of Russia by Napoleon and Hitler). The historical record shows that the precedence of imperial interests has often led to the suppression of aspirations for self-determination, freedom and democracy and to support to murderous dictators, with the ensuing devastation and death, from the Banana War in Nicaragua (1912), the support to Cuban dictator Fulgêncio Batista or the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion to Salvador Allende's Chile (1973); from the coup against Mohammad Mossaddegh, democratically elected president of Iran (1953), to the coup against Jacobo Arbenz, also democratically elected president of Guatemala (1954); from the invasion of Vietnam to fight the communist threat (1965) to the invasion of Afghanistan (2001), allegedly as a defensive move against the terrorists who attacked New York's twin towers (none of whom was Afghan), following 20 years of U.S. support to the mujahideen against the Soviet Union-backed communist government in Kabul; from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to take down Saddam Hussein and destroy his (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction to the intervention in Syria to defend rebels who, for the most part, were (and are) radical Islamists; from the 1995 intervention in the Balkans, carried out through NATO without UN authorization, to the 2011 destruction of Libya. There have always been "benevolent reasons" for such interventions, which always relied on accomplices and allies at the local level. What will remain of martyred Ukraine when the war ends (because all wars end eventually)? What will be the situation in the other European countries, notably in Germany and France, which remain dominated by the false notion that the Marshall Plan was the manifestation of self-sacrificing philanthropy on the part of the United States, to whom they owe infinite gratitude and unconditional solidarity? And what about Russia? What will a final assessment look like, beyond all the death and destruction that come with every war? Why don't we witness the emergence, in Europe, of a strong movement in favor of a just and lasting peace? Could it be that, despite the fact that the war is being fought in Europe, Europeans are waiting for some anti-war movement to emerge in the United States, so they can join it with a good conscience and without risk of being viewed as friends of Putin, or even as communists?

Why so much silence about all this?

Perhaps the most incomprehensible silence is that of the intellectuals. It is incomprehensible because intellectuals frequently claim to be more percipient than ordinary mortals. History has taught us that, in the periods immediately before the outbreak of wars, all politicians declare themselves against the war while contributing to it by virtue of their actions. Silence is nothing short of complicity with the masters of war. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in a period, as tragic for Europe as the present one, two great voices against the war made themselves heard: Romain Roland (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1915) in France and Karl Kraus in Austria. Neither of them lived long enough to know that history had proved them right. Today there are now no well-known intellectuals making resounding declarations for peace, for "independence of spirit," and for democracy.

Three imperialisms coexisted when World War I broke out: Russian, English, and German imperialism. No one doubted that the German imperialism was the most aggressive or, at least, the most expansionist of the three. Intriguingly, no major German intellectuals were heard at the time

speaking out against the war. The case of Thomas Mann is worthy of reflection. In November 1914, he published an article in *Neue Rundschau* entitled “Gedanken im Kriege” (Thoughts in Wartime), in which he defended war as an act of Kultur (i.e., Germany, as he himself clarified) against civilization. In his view, Kultur was the sublimation of the demonic (“die Sublimierung des Dämonischen”) and was above morality, reason and science. Mann concluded by writing that “Law is the friend of the weak; it would reduce the world to a level. War brings out strength” (“Das Gesetz ist der Freund des Schwachen, möchte gern die Welt verflachen, aber der Krieg lasst die Kraft erscheinen”) (Rolland 1915: 59). Mann viewed Kultur and militarism as brothers. In 1919, he published *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, (Mann,1919) a book in which he defended the Kaiser's policies and claimed that democracy was an anti-German idea. Fortunately for humanity, Thomas Mann would later change his mind and become one of the most vocal critics of Nazism. In contrast, from Kropotkin to Tolstoy and from Dostoyevsky to Gorky, the voices of Russian intellectuals raised against Russian imperialism never failed to make themselves heard.

There are many questions intellectuals have an obligation to address. Why have they stayed silent? Are there still intellectuals, or is a poor clericulture all that is left?

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Disclosure Statement: Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article’s text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

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