DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 19.05.2022 | Slavoj Žižek

Heroes of the Apocalypse

The war in Ukraine has made it clear that we can't go on with business as usual. This is our wakeup call to change for the better

Toward the end of April 2022, barely two months after Russia invaded Ukraine, the world became aware of a deep change in what the war means for the future. Gone is the dream of a quick resolution. The war has already been strangely 'normalised,' accepted as a process that will continue indefinitely. Fear of a sudden, dramatic escalation will haunt our daily lives. Authorities in Sweden and elsewhere are apparently advising the public to stock up on provisions to endure wartime conditions.

This shift in outlook is reflected on both sides of the conflict. In Russia, talk of a global conflict is growing louder. As the head of *RT*, Margarita Simonyan, put it: 'Either we lose in Ukraine, or a third world war begins. Personally, I think the scenario of a third world war is more realistic.'

Such paranoia is supported by crazed conspiracy theories about a united liberal-totalitarian Nazi-Jewish plot to destroy Russia. Upon being asked how Russia can claim to be 'denazifying' Ukraine when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is himself Jewish, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov replied: 'I could be wrong, but Hitler also had Jewish blood. [That Zelensky is Jewish] means absolutely nothing. Wise Jewish people say that the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews.'

On the other side, especially in Germany, a new version of pacifism is taking shape. If we look past all the lofty rhetoric and focus on what Germany is actually doing, the message is clear: 'Given our economic interests and the danger of being pulled into a military conflict, we must not support Ukraine too much, even if that means allowing it to be swallowed by Russia.' Germany fears crossing a line beyond which Russia will become truly angry. But only Vladimir Putin decides where that line lies on any given day. Playing on Western pacifists' fear is a major part of his strategy.

The need for ‘heroic’ acts

Obviously, everyone wants to prevent the outbreak of a new world war. But there are times when appearing too cautious will only encourage an aggressor. Bullies by nature always count on their victims not to fight back. To prevent a wider war – to establish any kind of deterrence – we, too, must draw clear lines.

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So far, the West has done the opposite. When Putin was still only preparing to launch his ‘special operation’ in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said his administration would have to wait and see if the Kremlin would pursue a ‘minor incursion’ or a full occupation. The implication, of course, was that a ‘minor’ act of aggression would be tolerable.

The recent shift in outlook reveals a deep, dark truth about the Western position. While we previously expressed fears that Ukraine would be quickly crushed, our real fear was exactly the opposite: that the invasion would lead to a war with no end in sight. It would have been much more convenient if Ukraine had fallen immediately, allowing us to express outrage, mourn the loss, and then return to business as usual. What should have been good news – a smaller country unexpectedly and heroically resisting a large power’s brutal aggression – has become a source of shame, a problem we don’t quite know what to do with.

Europe’s pacifist left warns against any re-embrace of the heroic-military spirit that consumed earlier generations. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas even suggests that Ukraine is guilty of moral blackmail vis-à-vis Europe. There is something deeply melancholic in his position. As Habermas well knows, post-war Europe was able to renounce militarism only because it was safely beneath the US nuclear umbrella. But the return of war to the continent suggests that this period may be over and that unconditional pacifism would require deeper and deeper moral compromises. Unfortunately, ‘heroic’ acts will be needed again, and not only to resist and deter aggression, but also to cope with problems such as ecological catastrophes and hunger.

The fear of change

In French, the gap between what we officially fear and what we really fear is nicely rendered by the so-called *ne explétif*, a ‘no’ that carries no meaning on its own because it is used only for reasons of syntax or pronunciation. It mostly occurs in subjunctive subordinate clauses

following verbs with negative connotation (*to fear, to avoid, to doubt*); its function is to emphasize the negative aspect of what came before it, as in: '*Elle doute qu'il ne vienne.*' ('She doubts he's /not/ coming'), or '*Je te fais confiance à moins que tu ne me mentes.*' ('I trust you unless you /don't/ lie to me').

Jacques Lacan used the *ne explétif* to explain the difference between a wish and a desire. When I say, 'I am afraid the storm will /not/ come,' my conscious wish is that it will not come, but my true desire is inscribed onto the added 'no': I am afraid the storm will *not* come, because I am secretly fascinated by its violence.

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Something like the *ne explétif* also applies to European fears regarding the cessation of Russian gas deliveries. 'We are afraid that the interruption of the gas supply will cause an economic catastrophe,' we say. But what if our stated fear is fake? What if we are really afraid that an interruption of the gas supply would *not* cause a catastrophe? As Eric Santner of the University of Chicago recently put it to me, what would it mean if we could quickly adapt? Ending Russian gas imports would not inaugurate the end of capitalism, but 'it would nonetheless force a real shift in the 'European' way of life,' a shift that would be most welcome irrespective of Russia.

To read the *ne explétif* literally, acting upon the 'no' is perhaps the most genuine political act of freedom today. Consider the claim, propagated by the Kremlin, that stopping Russian gas would be tantamount to economic suicide. Given what must be done to put our societies on a more sustainable path, would that not be liberating? To paraphrase Kurt Vonnegut, we will have avoided going down in history as the first society that didn't save itself because doing so wasn't cost effective.

How Europe can win the ideological war

The Western media are full of reporting on the billions of dollars that have been sent to Ukraine; yet Russia is still receiving tens of billions of dollars for the gas it delivers to Europe. What Europe refuses to consider is that it could exert an extraordinarily powerful form of non-military pressure on Russia while also doing much for the planet. Moreover, to renounce Russian gas would allow for a different kind of globalization – a sorely needed alternative to both the Western liberal-capitalist variety

and the Russian-Chinese authoritarian brand.

Russia does not only want to dismantle Europe. It is also presenting itself as an ally of the developing world against Western neo-colonialism. Russian propaganda ably exploits many developing and middle-income countries' bitter memories of Western abuses. Was the bombing of Iraq not worse than the bombing of Kyiv? Was Mosul not flattened as ruthlessly as Mariupol? Of course, while the Kremlin presents Russia as an agent of decolonization, it lavishes military support on local dictators in Syria, the Central African Republic, and elsewhere.

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The activities of the Kremlin's mercenary organization, the Wagner Group, which is deployed on behalf of authoritarian regimes around the world, offer a glimpse of what Russian-style globalization would look like. As Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Putin crony behind the group, recently said to a Western journalist: 'You are a dying Western civilization that considers Russians, Malians, Central Africans, Cubans, Nicaraguans, and many other peoples and countries to be Third World scum. You are a pathetic endangered bunch of perverts, and there are many of us, billions of us. And victory will be ours!' When Ukraine proudly declares that it defends Europe, Russia responds that it will defend all of Europe's past and present victims.

We should not underestimate the effectiveness of this propaganda. In Serbia, the latest opinion polls show that, for the first time, a majority of voters now oppose accession to the European Union. If Europe wants to win the new ideological war, it will have to alter its model of liberal-capitalist globalization. Anything short of radical change will fail, turning the EU into a fortress surrounded by enemies that are determined to penetrate and destroy it.

I am well aware of the implications of boycotting Russian gas. It would entail what I have repeatedly referred to as 'war communism.' Our entire economies would have to be reorganized, as in the case of a full-blown war or similarly large-scale disaster. This is not as far away as it may seem. Cooking oil is already being informally rationed by shops in the United Kingdom because of the war. If Europe renounces Russian gas, survival will demand similar interventions. Russia is counting on Europe's inability to do anything 'heroic.'

True, such changes would heighten the risk of corruption and provide opportunities for the military-industrial complex to grab extra profits. But these risks must be weighed against the larger stakes, which go well beyond the war in Ukraine.

The Five Horsemen

The world is dealing with multiple, simultaneous crises that evoke the four horsemen of the apocalypse: plague, war, hunger, and death. These riders cannot simply be dismissed as figures of evil. As Trevor Hancock, the first leader of the Green Party of Canada, has noted, they are 'remarkably close to what we might call the four horsemen of ecology, which regulate population size in nature.' In ecological terms, the 'four riders' play a positive role by preventing overpopulation. But when it comes to humans, this regulatory function hasn't worked: 'The human population has more than tripled in the past 70 years, from 2.5 bn in 1950 to 7.8 bn today. So what happened ... Why are we not controlled? Is there a fifth horseman that will cause our populations to crash at some point, as lemmings do?'

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Until recently, Hancock observes, humanity was able to hold the four riders in check with medicine, science, and technology. But now the 'massive and rapid global ecological changes we have triggered' are moving beyond our control. 'So, although of course an asteroid strike or super-volcano eruption could wipe us out, the greatest threat to the human population, the 'fifth horseman' if you like, is us.'

Whether we will be destroyed or saved is up to us. Yet while global awareness of these threats is growing, it has not translated into meaningful action, so the four riders are galloping faster and faster. After the plague of Covid19 and the return of large-scale war, hunger crises are now looming. All have or will result in mass death, as will the increasingly severe natural disasters wrought by climate change and biodiversity loss.

We should, of course, resist the temptation to glorify war as an authentic experience to lift us out of our complacent consumerist hedonism. The alternative is not simply to muddle through. Rather, it is to mobilize in ways that will benefit us long after the war is over. Given the dangers we face, military passion is a cowardly escape from reality. But so, too, is comfortable, non-heroic complacency.

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