

THE TRIANGLE OF VIOLENCE

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Shortly after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, George Orwell wrote : ‘The great age of democracy and of national self-determination was the age of the musket and the rifle.’ The present nuclear age, he pointed out, was of a different – more depressing - order. ‘Had the atomic bomb turned out to be something as cheap and easily manufactured as a bicycle or an alarm clock,’ Orwell continued, ‘it might well have plunged us back into barbarism, but it might, on the other hand, have meant the end of national sovereignty and of the highly-centralized police state.’ Alas, the human species now stood in danger of either destroying itself with its own weapons or destroying democracy with a new form of servitude wrapped in a ‘cold war’ peace that was not really peace at all. ‘Looking at the world as a whole,’ he concluded, ‘the drift for many decades has been not towards anarchy but towards the reimposition of slavery’.

Orwell’s remarks were astute. They put a finger on the real threats posed to democratic institutions by violence. From their beginnings in the Greek city-states, democracies have often been bellicose, and the wars they waged upon others sometimes produced their collapse. Yet democracies have also had an excellent record in not going to war against other democracies. And democracies’ more recent reliance on computerised, ‘risk-free’ aerial bombardment – minimising the number of body bags – plus the growth of a ‘post-heroic’ view of war, even an unwillingness among citizens to wave the flag, slip into military uniform and go off to fight wars, seem to externalise and minimise the threat of violence.

Unfortunately, this does not mean that war slips over the horizons of contemporary democracies, or that they easily put an end to violence and its damaging effects. Indeed, despite the end of Cold War, there is

mounting evidence that all democracies are today falling under the shadow of a new triangle of violence. One side of this triangle is the instability caused by nuclear-tipped states in the post-Cold War world system. The United States, which can and does act as a vigilante power backed by the threat of nuclear force, is presently forced to co-exist with four great powers, three of whom are nuclear powers : Europe, China, Russia, and Japan. The geometry of this arrangement clearly differs from the extended freeze imposed by the Cold War, when (according to Raymond Aron's famous formula) most parts of the world lived according to the rule, 'peace impossible, war unlikely'. With the collapse of bipolar confrontation, this rule has changed. There is no evidence of the dawn of a post-nuclear age. Instead, nuclear anarchy has settled on the whole world.

It may be that nuclear weapons have so reduced the need for mass mobilisation of troops that they have enabled a permanent 'civilianisation' of daily life in some Western states. It may also be true that the probability of a nuclear apocalypse, in which the earth and its peoples are accidentally or deliberately blown sky-high, has been permanently reduced. Perhaps. Yet the friends of democracy need to be on guard : for various reasons, perpetual peace is a very long way off in the future.

The key political powers are currently preoccupied with seeing through a new 'revolution in military affairs' geared to electronic intelligence gathering, computerised communications networks, protective screens, and highly destructive, precision-guided or 'smart' weapons capable of use anywhere on the globe. It is highly doubtful whether such weapons can eliminate 'frictions' (von Clausewitz) from battles. There are doubts too about whether the claimed level of precision can be affordably and reliably achieved, or about whether civilians uninterested in military heroism will

be prepared to witness, in silent gratitude, the violent elimination of others by remotely piloted vehicles, nano-weapons and sophisticated information systems. Major wars using these and more old-fashioned weapons remain a long-term possibility, including even the use of nuclear-tipped weapons in conflicts that originate in local upheavals and wars. Nuclear weapons abound – the arsenals of the United States and the Russian Federation each contain somewhere around 7,000 nuclear warheads. And despite the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, nuclear capacity, as can be seen in the nuclear arms races between Pakistan and India, and between Israel and the Arab states, is spreading. This is despite any prior agreements about the rules of nuclear confrontation and despite the fact (revealed in the National Missile Defence system planned by the Bush administration) that the issue of nuclear weapons is now intimately bound up with the so-called ‘modernisation’ of weapons systems in general.

Democracies, old and new, are threatened and morally troubled as well by the violence unleashed in uncivil wars. The violence of these wars is typically fuelled by global flows of arms, money and men, who take advantage of the crumbling of local political institutions and the jostling of competitor power groups for territory and resources. Whole populations are consequently dragged down into dark holes of violence. The results can hardly be described or analysed as ‘civil war’. The Sudan, Sierra Leone, Kashmir, the ill-named Democratic Republic of the Congo are a few of the many conflicts in which combatants’ violent struggle makes a terrible descent into hell – towards a place where violence becomes a grisly end in itself. All sober ground rules of war are swept aside. The enemy is demonised as all-powerful, as all-threatening, as all-violent. Hence, the rituals of violence against them are repeated endlessly, shamelessly. Acts of violence become gratuitous. The killers’ faces look blank. Sometimes

they smile. Their words are cynical, or clichéd accounts of their private or group fantasies. They live by simple rules of engagement : murder and counter-murder innocents, sever the hands and genitals of the enemy, cut out their tongues or stuff their mouths with stones, destroy graveyards, rape women, poison or torch food, make sure their blood flows like water. Guarantee that there are no innocent bystanders. Punish waverers – like the moderate Hutu leader, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who was murdered by her fellow Hutus for her moderation, her half-naked body left dumped on a terrace, a beer bottle inserted in her vagina. Not only the violated but the violent must be baptised in blood, made into an accomplice of the crimes. They must witness rape, torture, murder. They must not forget what they have done. The democratic world must be troubled with such painful questions as : what class of unreason prompts a Rwandan priest to set fire to his own church where terrified citizens have sought sanctuary, or Serbian bulldozer drivers to dig mass graves before murders begin? What instincts drive Bosnian Serb torturers to amuse themselves by forcing their Muslim victims to bite off the testicles of other Muslims? And the final imperative of those who wage uncivil war : be prepared (like Slobodan Miloseviæ) to boast to journalists or courts of law that butchers are heroes, that the victims are fictions or that they deserved what they got – that this was no crime against humanity.

Every nook and cranny of the democratic world is now threatened by a third side of the triangle of violence : apocalyptic terrorism. Strongly ‘classical’ elements of terrorism are certainly evident in the suicide attacks on American and French military facilities in Beirut in the early 1980s, the sarin attack on the Tokyo Metro, the bombing in early 1995 of a federal government building in Oklahoma City, the simultaneous attacks on the American embassies in Dar es-Salaam and Nairobi in August 1998, and

the assaults on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001. Each one of these attacks aimed at a fundamental change of the political order; and each unleashed violence in urban settings without however attempting to occupy its territory. Yet these attacks also represented a rupture with the tactics of Basque and Irish and Colombian gunmen, hijackers and bombers. The apocalyptic terrorists suppose that they are engaged in total war against an enemy unworthy of negotiation and incapable of compromise. The enemy is seen as both morally null and void and deserving of annihilation. Hence unlimited violence, bloodcurdling in its technical simplicity and witnessed by millions, is justified. The aim is to choose targets – key symbols of American power, for instance – and then to kill indiscriminately on a massive scale. The point is neither to win over public support nor to negotiate political deals. A deathly zero-sum game has to be played. Responsibility need not be claimed. The rottenness of the present-day world should be exposed. Nothing but catastrophe should result.

Future historians may well look back on our times and see in each of these depressingly violent trends not only the end of the distinction between war and peace. They may also record that we lived in times when the three sides of the triangle became so tightly linked that (as two Chinese military scholars, Xiangsui and Liang, have recently argued) a new form of ‘unrestricted warfare’ swallowed up the whole world. Is the triangle of violence that now surrounds democracies a prelude to a more quarrelsome and barbarous Hobbesian world? Are we fated to live in a global order riddled with violence, suspicion of enemies, and restless struggles that produce universal fear – an order in which democracy has little or no place? Nobody of course knows. The challenge for democrats of all persuasion – as Orwell understood - is to find fresh beginnings, to invent

long-term remedies against violence, in order to prove that our fate has not yet been decided, and that democracy after all still has a future