



Why Pacifism Now?

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Abstract

Pacifism has always been a marginal position, but only in the 20th century did it become stigmatized – i.e. dismissed and ridiculed as outside the boundaries of serious discussion. This reflected the rise of “total war”, as exemplified by the century’s two world wars, where the war making claims of the state on the individual became absolute, hence any questioning of war itself became heretical. After this century of war, our greatest challenge is not to repeat the endless aimless conflicts of the past. Pacifism’s contribution to this is partly theoretical. Through its analysis of the “war system” it debunks any thought that war can be ended by war, as the past has imagined; it can only be ended by unraveling the system itself. Pacifism’s contribution to this is practical, by placing the politics of nonviolence at the center of this task.

Keywords

pacifism – just war theory – war system

Pacifism has always been a minority position, if not a marginal one. But prior to the 20th century it was a respected position and one that – depending on how broadly you construe “pacifism” – was often espoused by persons of influence. Here are some examples.

The just war tradition arose from taking pacifism seriously. Augustine sought to balance the imperatives of war with Jesus’ call to turn the other cheek (Yoder, 2009). The peace voice never entirely disappeared from Christianity. Erasmus, the most prominent intellectual of the Renaissance, wrote in his *Treatise on War*, one of his most famous writings, that “there is nothing more unnaturally wicked, more productive of misery, more extensively destructive,

more obstinate in mischief, more unworthy of man as formed by nature, much more of man professing Christianity” (Erasmus, 1517, p. 1). Pacifism remained a concern, if mainly as a foil, for the first just war thinkers. Grotius wrote at the start of his *The Law of War and Peace*: “That war is irreconcilable with all law is a view held not alone by the populace; expressions are often let slip by well-informed and thoughtful men which lend countenance to such a view. Nothing is more common than the assertion of antagonism between law and arms”, referencing the early Christian pacifist Tertullian (Grotius, 1625, p. 8). Vattel began his remarks on war in *The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* by acknowledging those who take “in a literal sense the moderation recommended in the gospel,” while insisting that “The generality of mankind will, of themselves, guard against its contagion” (Vattel, 1758, p. 218).

Another example is from pre-World War I United States.

For two decades, William Jennings Bryan was America’s dominant progressive figure (Kazin, 2006, Curti, 1972). He is the only person to be nominated for president three times by a major political party (the Democrats). He is the only presidential candidate to base an entire campaign on anti-imperialism (1900). After being appointed Secretary of State in the Wilson administration, he is one of only two such secretaries to resign from principled opposition to going to war (World War I). Disagreement surrounds how much his passionate antiwar views qualify him as a pacifist. But consider this: Bryan’s hero was Leo Tolstoy, the most vigilant pacifist of his era who Bryan acknowledged as a profound influence on him. In its first year of publication, Bryan’s newspaper *The Commoner* praised Tolstoy’s opposition to all violence. Bryan made a pilgrimage to Tolstoy’s Russian estate in 1903 resulting in a twelve hour uninterrupted conversation. When Tolstoy was dying, the only image on his bedroom wall was that of William Jennings Bryan.

Contrast this with how the subsequent decades rendered pacifism not just marginalized but *stigmatized* – in ways that have verged on the hysterical.

Pacifism was an object of derision when I entered academia in the 1970s. No sin was too great that it could not be ascribed to “the pacifist”. It was responsible for the age’s wholesale slaughter of innocents (Elizabeth Anscombe: “pacifism and the respect for pacifism is [sic] not the only thing that has led to a universal forgetfulness of the law against killing the innocent; but it has had a great share in it” [Anscombe, 1971, p. 270]). It was a widespread source of corruption, even among those who didn’t believe it. (“Pacifism has corrupted enormous numbers of people who will not act [?] according to its tenets” – Anscombe again [Anscombe, 1971, p. 271]). If pacifists were not cowards, they were still hopelessly confused muddleheads – a bigger sin for philosophers,

by the way. (Jan Narveson: “The people who assess conscientious objection as cowardice or worse are taking an understandable step ... their actions are due, not to cowardice, but to confusion” [Narveson, 1975, p. 450]). Or they were just moral freaks. (Tom Regan: “To regard the pacifist’s beliefs as bizarre and vaguely ludicrous is, perhaps, to put it mildly” [Regan, 1975, p. 465]. One wonders what it would mean to put it *starkly* – CR.)

No argument was too idiotic that it could not be ascribed to “the pacifist”. Consider this from Martin Caedel: “The pacifist holds that, even if a state fought an extraordinarily successful and costless war, it would nevertheless have committed an impermissible act and would have done better to have submitted stoically to assured butchery and enslavement” (Caedel, 1987, pp. 145–146). Can we imagine any other political position being trivialized in this way? Imagine someone dismissing opponents of sexual trafficking by saying: “Even if sexual trafficking didn’t harm anyone and everyone subjected to it felt happy and fulfilled, and even if it were necessary for procreation so that the human race could survive, opponents of sexual trafficking would *still* want to abolish it!”

Such dismissals of pacifism are especially striking coming from philosophers, who otherwise evidence not just a tolerance of but also an affinity for positions generally deemed unreasonable. (I owe my thoughts on this disparity to O’Connor, 2022.) Philosophers have had no trouble arguing that “no one knows anything”, or that “the world does not exist”. The distinguished philosopher Peter Unger once wrote an article titled “I Do Not Exist” (Unger, 1979). But, in an era in which hundreds of millions of people have been killed by war, the pacifist’s unconditional condemnation of it is somehow considered – *beyond the pale!* Jenny Teichman has noted that these dismissals of “the pacifist” never mention any *actual* pacifist (Teichman, 1986). After all, it is easier to blame pacifists for neglecting the law against killing innocents without mentioning Gandhi; it is easier to blame them for widespread corruption without mentioning British pacifist Vera Brittain; it is easier to charge them with being muddleheads or moral freaks without mentioning Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

How did pacifism go from a respected position to being regarded as a paradigm of moral idiocy?

The main factor, I’d suggest, is the rise of total war in the 20th century. Total wars like World War I and World War II were a reversion to the religious wars of the 17th century in which any hint of dissent was demonized. And their claims on the individual were absolute. Universal conscription forced young men to fight and die for the state. In World War I, the American government sentenced 17 draft resisters to death, 150 to life sentences, and hundreds of others to sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years (the last draft resistor was not released until 1933). Amidst such frenzy, pacifists came to be regarded like atheists at

a religious revival: their very existence deligitimized the whole enterprise, so they had to be dismissed as intrinsically immoral or fundamentally irrational, guilty of every sin imaginable.

One reason why pacifism is being taken seriously once again is that we have moved beyond the era of total war and its absolute claims on the individual. When I was a young man, when conscription was still in force, what it mainly meant to be a pacifist was that one would not serve in the military. Prior to the Vietnam War, military service defined one's identity as an "American"; believe it or not, conscription ranked among the most popular American institutions (Ryan 2009). Now, hardly anyone wants to serve in the military. They profess to "honor the troops" but they have no interest in becoming one *themselves*. So they still believe in "dying for one's country" as long as someone *else* is doing the dying. Hence the difference between pacifists and others no longer involves the readiness to fight in war.

What, then, does it mean to be a pacifist?

"Pacifism" is a relatively new term, but the tradition it denotes is a long and complex one (Fiala 2018). The term has had multiple meanings ranging from what I would call "big tent" pacifism (of the sort espoused by American figures like William James or Jane Addams) to "nonresistance" (of the sort espoused by Tolstoy, that renounced all violence even in personal self-defense) to nonviolence (of the sort espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who endorsed what he called "realistic pacifism"). After a certain point, I think there are diminishing returns to parsing out its many meanings. It is a bit like how people used to sort out all the different meanings of "Marxism" while saying hardly anything about why anyone would be attracted to it, whatever its meaning. It seems to me that pacifism is best understood in terms of what all forms of pacifism have in common, however much they otherwise diverge. Their common commitment has been to *war abolitionism*, and it is that commitment which in my view makes pacifism so relevant – indeed, so imperative – today.

As I construe it, pacifism as war abolitionism has both a theoretical and a practical component. It is both a way of *appraising* war and a way of *opposing* war. Disagreements among pacifists can involve both matters, plus people can be of several minds within themselves. My attraction to pacifism is partly from religious-type grounds, from a background as both a Quaker and a Dorothy Day-type Catholic, and it is partly for more secular reasons of the type espoused by the "big-tent" pacifism just noted. I see these as climbing the same mountain while regarding their relation to each other as complex and requiring further reflection.

Let me first say something about pacifism's practical opposition to war and then relate this to its theoretical appraisal of war.

The "big tent" pacifism at the start of the 20th century was partly a rejection of the view that war was an intrinsically *good* thing. The chief American proponent of this was President Theodore Roosevelt who held that war exemplified the "strenuous life" that was necessary for realizing the "martial virtues" of "heroism", "glory", etc. whose preciousness – indeed, "sacredness" – in his view had nothing to do with the reasons for which war was fought. To this end, he once urged invading Canada if no other enemy could be found. Roosevelt dismissed pacifists as "mollycoddles", the era's term for "girly-men", whose opposition to war was part and parcel of the "feminization" of American culture which he saw all around him. Put less crudely, ideas like this remain with us as part of pro-war ideology.

They were certainly loud and clear at the start of World War I. One need only think of Wittgenstein who apparently had no opinion on the fate of Serbian nationalism but immediately volunteered as a sort of "existential test" to escape the "false view of life" by "looking death in the face". But a significant fact was how the main justification for that war eventually came to be framed as the securing of peace, not just now but *forever*. It was, that is, a "war to end all war".

This strikes me as a new development. World War I was also a "war to defend civilization", but wars had long been framed that way. It was also about the German invasion of "tiny Belgium" (whose king had just recently concluded his genocide in the Congo); but wars had also been justified as defenses of public international law.

But it's hard to find a precedent for the idea of fighting a "war to end war" – not just this war, but *all* war. Yet it is a natural outgrowth of modern, total war in this sense: an enterprise so destructive, inhumane, and generally so absurd can only be justified by a cosmic cause. Defending "tiny Belgium" couldn't fit the bill, so as the full horror of World War I became evident the best argument for it was that it would ensure that this sort of thing never happened again. This became an enduring theme. The Atlantic Charter, the closest the Allies got to a mission statement in World War II, committed its signers to a "world without fear" (involving a commitment to "common disarmament"); the United Nations Charter began with the pledge "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". When my father enlisted in World War II, it was not with the expectation that afterwards the United States would immediately face yet another "mortal enemy", the Soviet Union; nor was it from any serious concern that the United States itself was physically threatened. Rather, it was

because he took the Atlantic Charter seriously, that fighting would somehow end all war. And the idea persists. President George W. Bush's "Global War on Terror" did not explicitly aim to end *all* war, just terror; but it did promise to bring about "infinite justice", in his words, which presumably would lessen the occasions for war. A variation on the "war-to-end-all wars" meme is that a *new* way of war will solve the problem of war. This has actually been a justification for increasing the horrors of modern war, starting with the aerial bombing. The idea was that if you make war horrible enough, people would reject it entirely.

All of which contributed to further stigmatizing "the pacifist". If war is the means to peace, then renouncing war means you don't really want peace! To the aforementioned accusations against pacifists as corrupters, cowards, muddleheads, etc. we can now add: *frauds*.

The pacifist buys none of this. Wars to end war have not ended war. Charles Beard ironically portrayed our age as "permanent war for permanent peace". The larger point is that "peace" has become the ideology of war. This sort of thing has happened before. From the outset, human rights were offered as a justification for imperialism and its crimes; King Leopold justified his genocide in the Congo as a humanitarian endeavor. So as I see it, the starting point of the pacifist's practical opposition to war is that you cannot end war by war any more than you can end slavery by enslaving people.

But why *can't* you end war by war? True, wars to end war have not ended war, but nothing else has ended war either. So maybe we just haven't fought the right kind of wars. And if war can end war, then peace *should* be the ideology of war – as long as it's the right kind of war.

This brings us to pacifism's other component, its theoretical appraisal of war.

The notion of a war to end all wars obviously presumes an account of what causes war, so that that cause can be expunged. So what is that cause? Marxists like Lenin had an answer. It was capitalism, or capitalism in its latest stage as imperialism. Lenin opposed World War I, yet he like other Marxists still believed in a war to end all war: it would be to a war to end capitalism. Woodrow Wilson saw Lenin as his great adversary and sought to ensure that World War I had been a war to end all wars. But he had no clear conception of what this meant. It had something to do with the "self-determination of peoples", but only some peoples had that right and other people didn't. In any event, nationalism was not the solution to war, on the contrary it became a major contributor to war.

If there has been a persistent theme in liberal versions of the war to end wars, I think it is a moralistic one. This was loud and clear in Bush's "War on Terrorism": that the enemies were evil, or more colloquially "bad guys", as

evidenced in the fact that they “hated freedom” and everything else “we” hold “sacred” – so the war to end war would end war by rubbing them out. Stated baldly, this may seem a bit batty. For a more sophisticated version I refer the reader to the post-9/11 manifesto, “Statement from U.S. Scholars In Support of the U.S. Government’s War on Terrorism”, or “What We’re Fighting For”, signed by some of America’s most prominent liberal thinkers. Against those nay-saying pacifists who questioned the wisdom of a “Global War on Terror”, these scholars issued a clarion call for a war against all those who hated “universal values” in general and “American values” in particular. Among those “universal” principles was “Killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God”. (But note: killing in the name of “universal” principles was not just permissible but obligatory, especially if you’re killing those who believe in killing in the name of God.) Examples of “American” ideals included “the conviction that all persons possess innate human dignity as a birthright, and that consequently each person must always be treated as an end rather than used as a means” – as articulated by that great American patriot, Immanuel Kant. They concluded, “One day, this war will end”, confident that “unmitigated global evil” would be no match for America’s 792 longer-range assault aircraft and its 5000 M1 Abrams tanks. The authors did not anticipate the war ending in America’s defeat by the Taliban and its 10,000 or so crudely armed soldiers (“Statement from U.S. Scholars”, 2022).

What all these diagnoses share is that war is caused by something *else*. Indeed, a war to end war only makes sense on this assumption – as a war to eradicate that something *else*. By contrast, I take the pacifist view to be that what causes war is *war*, hence the futility of waging war to end war. But this claim clearly needs unpacking, and I regard unpacking it as one of the central theoretical challenges to pacifism today.

Here is how some of my own thinking proceeds.

As Michael Walzer stressed in his book *Just and Unjust Wars*, the just war paradigm is deeply informed by what he termed the “domestic analogy” (Walzer, 1977). This is the notion that international war, as a conflict between states, can be likened to domestic crime, as a conflict between persons. Hence what Walzer calls the “legalist” paradigm: just as domestic law assesses the criminality of individual conflicts, just war principles assess the criminality of international conflicts. This fits with that part of the just war tradition that construes war as a form of law enforcement. An immediate problem is that states are “like” persons only in the most abstract sense, and equating them so contributes to the utter failure of just war theory to analyze the *nature* of the “state”. This bears on a further point. The domestic analogy would liken just war theory’s approach to war to the law’s approach to domestic crime. But the

latter presumes an account of *why* crimes occur, i.e. the sources of crime generally and the sources of particular crime, whereas a striking fact about today's just war theory is how *little* it says about war's sources, either generally or particularly. Note that "realism", just war theory's foil, at least gives such an account in terms of power relations; just war theory's dismissal of realism's a-moralism throws the baby out with the bathwater, so that it is left with moralistic explanations of war as a matter of "good guys" vs. "bad guys".

If just war theory focuses on the criminality of particular wars, I take pacifism to regard war generally as a system of organized crime. I reference here Charles Tilly's famous article on war as organized crime, specifically a protection racket (Tilly, 1985). Unpacking this is partly a matter of approaching war historically. Scholars of feudalism have spoken of it as a large scale protection racket whereby lords charged the peasantry for protecting them against the threats that lords and their knights created (Ferejohn and McCall, 2018). The alliance of kings and cities that brought about feudalism's demise replaced it with a new form of protection racket, where "states" eventually replaced lords in charging their subjects for security against the threats that states themselves created. Unpacking this is partly a matter of approaching war structurally. This means drawing on the rich tradition of sociological literature that regards the state as essentially an instrument of war making, whose endeavors in that regard invariably generate ideologies – most importantly, nationalism – that enable its war making efforts (Mann, 2012, Giddens, 1987, Ryan 2018, Ryan 1996). At the heart of those efforts is the state's relation to modernity's other key institution, capitalism. Put simply, the alliance of kings and cities becomes an alliance of states and capital, the one driven by the impulse to domination, the other by the impulse to exploitation, and together engendering a system of extortion. Or so the story would go (Arrighi, 2010). This is all part of an inquiry into the nature of the *war system*, a notion that has played a prominent role in pacifist thinking from 19th century thinkers like Charles Sumner to 20th century thinkers like Randolph Bourne and more recently Mary Kaldor, Martin Shaw, Jonathan Schell, Andrew Alexandra, and Robert Holmes (Sumner, 2019, Bourne, 1999, Kaldor, 2013, Shaw, 1988, Schell, 2004, Alexandra, 2003, Holmes, 2016). It is the war system that explains how war produces war, hence it is the war system that must be unraveled if war is to ever end.

Unraveling this system is no easy or straightforward task. What makes the question of resisting war so challenging is that there are too *many* answers to it. But let me note one way in which we can learn from history here as well. Feudalism's demise partly resulted from changes in the techniques of warfare. Historians speak of a "military revolution" that dramatically expanded the cost and logistical challenges of warfare in ways that required a new institution

– the state – to manage them. This concentration of power brought with it the dramatic centralization of power typical of the modern state. So if changes in the war system have reflected changes in the techniques of power, this suggests that unraveling the war system will involve a more *radical* change in the techniques of power – from those of violence to those of nonviolence. This demilitarization of power will also mean a decentralization of power, raising the question of whether or in what form the “state” will remain with us beyond the war system.

What has also become clear in the 21st century is that war won't end otherwise.

Even before the post-9/11 “Global War on Terror” had petered out, official discourse was pivoting to a new “Cold War”, except now it was a three-way conflict between the United States, China, and Russia. The last Cold War had involved issues like human rights, but any such notions now took second place to portrayals of “great power conflict”, a suitably vague notion that included every possible disagreement. Late 19th century Social Darwinist ideologies were now revived to insist that the strength of one country was inherently a threat to others. Former Department of Defense official Elbridge Colby wrote in his *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* that Chinese “dominance” in Asia would “compromise Americans’ freedom, prosperity, and even physical security” (Colby, 2022, p. 10). Rush Doshi, a Biden administration official, wrote in *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* that America and China are now locked in a life-and-death struggle “over regional and global order, as well as the various forms of control to sustain it” (Doshi, 2022, p. 300). Unless it could check Chinese aspirations, the United States was in danger of losing its “preeminent position” worldwide.

There is truly reason for alarm. General Mark Milley is the chairman of the United States military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, having previously been the Army’s Chief of Staff. He is well positioned to represent official military thinking. An article titled “General Milley Predicts Grim Future of Deadly Great Power Wars Fought in Cities” recounted his 2022 speech to the United States Military Academy’s graduating class (Anzalone, 2022). It reported, “America’s highest-ranking military officer painted a picture of a dark future with great power wars fought in urban environments. Speaking to graduating cadets at the United States Military Academy, General Mark Milley forewarned of death tolls for US soldiers in the tens of thousands. ‘As we are entering a world that is becoming more unstable. The world you are being commissioned into has the potential for significant international conflict between great powers, and that potential is increasing, not decreasing.’” After listing America’s new arsenal of

robotic tanks, invisible airplanes, and other technical doo-dads General Milley concluded that “the coming wars will exact high tolls on civilian populations.”

“Fighting in cities” ... with “high civilian tolls” – between “the great powers”: this is what the most sophisticated military thinking is now anticipating. The only thing that will end these endless repetitions of the war cycle will be a reflective, passionate commitment to undo the war system. This is why we need pacifism now.

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