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Some Remarks on War Spirit

Paul Goodman

1962

In a disturbing study of the paralyzing effects of war spirit and war preparations, “The Arms Race as an Aspect of Popular Culture,” Professor Robert Engler of Columbia warns us of the dislocation of scientific and professional education; the dislocation of the normal pattern of economy and industry; the growing spirit of the garrison state: censorship, lying propaganda, the infiltration of the (retired) military into the industrial system; the crazy competitive goals in armaments and the space race; the astonishing distortion of community values in the private-shelter business. People accept the whittling away of civil liberties. There is distortion even in the play and dreams of children.

We must ask also the opposite question: Why are people susceptible? What *in* our society and culture makes such a development possible? What paralysis in the public allows these preparations to become so deadly? It is a useful question, because to the degree that we can answer it, we can try to withdraw energy from the conditions and feelings that lurk in the background of the present spirit.

The economic advantages of the Cold War (to some) must be mentioned first. And we may use economic policy as an unerring

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index of the secret position of the government in Washington. The government can protest as loudly as it wishes to the people of the world that it wants disarmament with inspection, etc.; but so long as there are no *actual* economic plans and preparations being made to reconvert industries to peacetime uses and to take up the slack of employment that disarmament would involve, we cannot believe the government. There are no such plans and preparations, though there is a Disarmament Agency and though Professor Melman has offered them a philosophy in *The Peace Race*.

John Ullmann of Hofstra has shown that even apart from the budget, our political structure itself predisposes us to the war spirit; for it combines prejudice and regimentation, self-righteousness and violence. And every study of the present regime in Washington shows that it has become largely a machine for waging Cold War. Even vested economic interests must succumb, for the government can make or ruin a firm by manipulating the contracts for armaments.

Let me now, however, go on to recall some psychological factors in the American cultural background that make the Cold War “advantageous.” Our modern times are affluent and disappointed, active and powerless, technical and purposeless. This clinch is the Cold War.

In America, the so-called high standard of living, urbanism, the sexual revolution only partly carried through, have notoriously resulted in excessive busyness with little reward in happiness, and in excessive stimulation with inadequate sexual or creative discharge. People are balked by the general inhibition of anger and physical aggression in our cities, offices, and streamlined industries and grievance committees. And since one cannot be angry, one cannot be affectionate.

At the same time, as part of the same urban-technological-economical-political complex, common people today are extraordinarily powerless. Few ever make, individually or in face-to-face associations, decisions about many of the most important matters.

Labor decides about neither the product nor the process, the utility nor the distribution. Affairs are bureaucratized, with inevitable petty delays and tensions. There is an almost total absence of real rather than formal democracy. A local meeting, e.g., a Parent-Teachers meeting, has no power to decide but can only exert pressure, which is usually cleverly evaded. Voters decide not issues or policies but the choice between equivalent Front personalities. The corporations dominate the economy and small enterprises are discouraged. The pattern, especially of middle-class life, is scheduled often down to the minute, and spontaneity is penalized. Even consumption goods are bought for emulation rather than final satisfaction. Police surveillance increases conformity and timidity. With increasing wealth, there is increasing insecurity.

According to the theory of masochism of Wilhelm Reich, which has become fairly standard, the result of such excessive stimulation and inadequate discharge is a need to “explode,” be pierced, beaten, etc., in order to release the feelings that have been pent up. Of course, it is people themselves who are imprisoning themselves; they could release themselves if it were not for the totality of their fearfulness and ineffectuality. That is to say, they cannot release themselves. Instead, they feel that release must come from outside agents or events. More healthily, this is felt as excitement in destruction and danger; in the lure of daring and dangerous sports; in the innocent joy in watching a house burn down and living through hurricanes and earthquakes (and discussing them endlessly.) And characteristically of poor mankind, once they been given the cosmical permission of Necessity, people act with the community and heroism that is in them from the beginning. The case is darker, more painful and sadistic when, avidly but generally more privately, people read up the air disasters. Likewise, the nuclear phobia of many patients is a projection of their own self-destructive and destructive wishes, and it vanishes when so analyzed, that is, when the patient can reconnect the images of dis-

aster to the actual things that he wants to explode, burn, poison, annihilate.

Similar are fantasies of destructive Enemies, who will do the job for us. And it does not help if two opposed Enemies cooperate in their projections, so that each one recognizes a threat in the other and arms accordingly and so provides more tangible proof of the threat. (This phenomenon of mirror-image projections has been somewhat studied by Professor Osgood.)

A less familiar factor, but to my mind a very important one, is the inhibited response to the insulting and nauseating tone of our commercialized popular culture and advertising. People experience a self-disgust and a wish to annihilate, vomit up, this way of life; but they hold their nausea down, they feel powerless to give up this culture — it is all there is — they cannot even shut off the TV.

On these grounds, we can speak of War Spirit as an epidemic wish to commit suicide *en masse*, as one community. To have the frustration over with! to get rid of all that junk at once! Thus, an important explanation of the paralysis of the public in safeguarding against, or simply dismissing, the obvious irrationality and danger of war policies, is that people are inwardly betrayed by a wish for the catastrophe that they rationally oppose.

So far negatively. But there is a positive side. Powerless and un-inventive in decisive affairs of everyday life, people increasingly find excitement in the doings of the Great on far-off stages and in the Big News in the newspapers. This occurs everywhere as spectatoritis and TV-watching. An event might be happening outside the window, but people will watch it on the TV screen instead; for there, it is purified, magnified, and legitimized by the national medium. What is sponsored by a national network is Reality. And, of course, of this Big News the most important is the drama of the Warring Powers, that toys with, and continually threatens to satisfy, every man's orgastic-destructive urges. Brinkmanship and Playing Chicken and the Testing of bigger firecrackers — however stupid and immediately rejectable by common reason — are never-

ageable meetings, and being moved by things that are beautiful, curious, or wonderful — these diminish the spirit of war because they attach people to life. They should not be postponed while we “buy time” with deterrence and negotiations. On the contrary, if people began to insist on more life, the Front Page would carry very different news.

Let me add a postscript. I read these remarks to a conference of learned men, experts in the social sciences, in engineering, and in politics, discussing the deadly danger of the Cold War and the need to get out of it. The great majority of them found what I said to be entirely irrelevant. They were, predictably, hilarious about the references to sexuality. We are faced with an unexampled situation, a matter of life and death, publicly apparent to all the people and to which people hardly respond. Yet these experts believe that the concrete facts of people’s lives are not involved at all. Being superstitious as only modern scientists can be, they believe that something comes from nothing. Presumably, none of these facts of a life worth living are existent facts for them — not when they are “thinking.” They are “practical”: they face the issues as presented. Presented by whom? why?

One scientist, from Washington, spoke up and said: “You say that the Americans have a neurotic feeling of powerlessness. You don’t realize that those in power are equally frustrated.”

theless taken as most serious maneuvers. The powerlessness of the small gets solace by identification with power Elites, and people eagerly say “We” and “They,” meaning one bloc or the other.

The outpouring of dammed-up hostility is channeled antiseptically and guiltlessly through pugnacious diplomacy, interest in impersonal technology, and the excitement of war-games theory. Push-button and aerial war is especially like a dream. It is forbiddingly satisfactory in its effects, yet one is hardly responsible for it, one has hardly even touched a weapon. Games-theory has the mechanical innocence of a computer.

My guess is that in the contemporary conditions of technology and standard of living, the Americans suffer somewhat more from the above psychological pressures than the Russians, who are still starved for consumer’s goods and hope naively to get important satisfaction from them. The Americans have more need for the Cold War than the Russians. They can afford it more and, for the same reason, need it more. Since the Russians can afford it less, they also need it less. (I am told, however, that in Russia the big arms-production has gone so far that they too have an industrial-military complex that now goes by itself.) On the other hand — again this is my guess — in dictatorships there is more underlying animal fear, fear because acquaintances have suddenly vanished, fear of speaking out; therefore their War Spirit might involve more desperate adventurousness, more need for little proving victories, because people feel more inwardly unsafe. Also — this is said to be true of the Chinese — when there is famine and utter misery of life, it is only extreme actions that can weld people together at all. (The remedy for this is rather simple, to feed them.)

By and large, the panicky craze of the Americans for private, family bomb shelters seems best explicable in these terms. Because of the threat of poisoning and fire, public policy has come into an obvious clash with elementary biological safety. Yet it is impossible to change the public policy, and get rid of the industrial-military complex, for the war is wished for, and the identification with the

Powerful is necessary for each powerless individual's conceit. The private bomb shelter is the way out of the clinch: It allows the war to happen, yet it withdraws from reliance on the Public Policy which is evidently too dangerous to trust. It is a Do-It-Yourself. It even somewhat satisfies the biological instinct for safety — if one reads *Life* rather than scrupulous scientists. Naturally all the better if the Shelters can then be harmonized with business as usual and become an emulative luxury, a part of the high standard of living.

The entire argument of this essay is summed up in the official bulletin of the Office of Civil Defense, when it says, "Fallout is merely a physical fact of this nuclear age. It can be faced like any other fact." Here we have the full-blown hallucination: dropping the bombs is — thought of as a physical fact rather than a social fact. And also this outrageous and moronic proposition is swallowed like everything else.

But as Margaret Mead has recently pointed out, this private flight of the Americans into their shelters has aroused shock and horror in the Europeans who are equally endangered. *They* cannot identify with the Powers; and many of them — British, Dutch, Russians — know what it is to be bombed and suffer in the war. (The Germans seem to be eager to assume the Bully role again themselves.) Naturally, Professor Mead's solution is international bomb shelters for the fertile and academically talented!

Historically, the theorists of militarism have profited by the above analysis. From the time of Frederick William, the gait and posture of the warrior has been designed, by competent teachers of gymnastics, to cut off full sexual feeling and tenderness: the pelvis retracted, the anus tightened, the belly hardened, the exhalation impeded by squaring the shoulders. Marriage and other civilian ties are discouraged (but not the economic and political connections of retired generals). A soldier or sailor on the town must not become emotionally involved with the woman he picks up. And the Marine, balked in his manliness and insulted in his independence by spirit-breaking discipline and the chain of command, lives by a conceit

of toughness and power, with slavish griping to let off steam. All are in a state of muscular hyper-toms, to snap unthinkingly to a command. The jaw is in a position of watchfulness. The public glorification of this mindless power is the complement of the public masochism; it is experienced as the terrible sublimity of war.

What then? How under modern conditions can we wage peace instead of war? We need a vast increase in the opportunities for initiative and making important decisions. This involves considerable decentralization of management, in industry, in government, in urban affairs like housing and schooling. (I do not think that this necessarily implies less efficiency, but that is another story.) It involves the use of our productivity to insure minimum subsistence, but otherwise the encouragement of individual enterprises. We must forthrightly carry through the sexual revolution, encourage the sexuality of children and adolescents, get rid of the sex laws and other moral laws. Many people might be offended by this policy, it might have disadvantages, but our present condition of stimulation and inadequate discharge is simply too dangerous in its irrational effects; we cannot continue it. We must revive individual worth and self-respect, by jobs of useful work that employ more of each person's capacities, and an education that makes the culture and technology comprehensible and appropriable, so that people may be at home with it and possibly inventive and creative in it. We need a genuine folk-culture to enliven community, and a lofty public culture to give us meaning, and loyalty to a greater self. And paradoxically, if there were less false politeness, conformity, and civil peace — more energetic confrontation, loud quarrels, and fist fights — there would be less ultimate and catastrophic explosiveness. These things comprise, in my opinion, the modern moral equivalent of war that William James was after. They are entirely practical; and if, as the Americans are, they are utopian — there it is.

An occasional fist fight, a better orgasm, friendly games, a job of useful work, initiating enterprises, deciding real issues in man-