



‘Universal Suicidal Folly’ or Eliminating Human Suffering

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Accepted: 25 August 2022 / Published online: 16 September 2022

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Keywords Peace · War · Social science · Postdigital · Public intellectual · Manifesto · Conflict · The Russell–Einstein Manifesto · Philip Noel-Baker

Speaking Truth to Power

We are living the quadruple crisis of the ongoing climate catastrophe (Peters et al. 2021), biological hazards such Covid-19 (Jandrić et al. 2020, 2021, 2022), the deterioration of democracy (Carr 2020), and the new threat of nuclear war (Jandrić 2022). It is as if these difficulties have drawn humanity to the last cliff of apparently irreversible catastrophe, and an omnicide looms on the horizon. According to Slavoj Žižek, referring to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine,

[t]he situation exhibits a basic madness: at a time when humanity’s very survival is jeopardized by ecological (and other) factors, and when addressing those threats should be prioritized over everything else, our primary concern has suddenly shifted—again—to a new political crisis. Just when global cooperation is needed more than ever, the ‘clash of civilizations’ returns with a vengeance. (Žižek 2022)

The global research community has put their collective energy and wisdom into all these ills to find solutions; references used in the previous section represent just a fraction of these efforts by the *Postdigital Science and Education* community. Some of us have been aware of the ‘risk society’ (Coeckelbergh 2020), but the awareness has not helped us change our direction. Others emphasize that these trends are inextricably linked to capitalism and make various attempts at developing alternatives (Suoranta et al. 2022). Some of us see a dim light at the end of the tunnel, but unfortunately, it is the headlight of the oncoming train (Suoranta and FitzSimmons 2017).

For a long time, scholars, peace activists, and organizations have talked about equality, justice, and peace—and they are talking about it as I write these words. Yet, our voices are rarely heard by the politicians and the general public (McLaren

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2022), and those voices that get listened to get often misinterpreted (Hayes 2019). Despite all lip service, equality, justice, and peace are not addressed enough (or are addressed only cosmetically) in public discourse, politics, policy, and practice.

Today's technologies make it easier to blow up the world, in many ways, than ever in human history. Yet the danger of human self-destruction is not new. Remember C. Wright Mills, who, at the end of his life, turned from sociology to current affairs and viciously condemned the nuclear arms race between the superpowers of his time? According to Mills (1958), the US's war-mongering elites and the Soviet Union's global class-war dreaming nomenclature were ideological mythmakers that tried to bend other nations and regions of the world to their will. Mills declared that the leaders

have constructed a paranoid reality all their own; in the name of practicality they have projected a Utopian image of capitalism. They have replaced the responsible interpretation of events with the disguise of events by a maze of public relations; respect for public debate with unshrewd notions of psychological warfare; intellectual ability with agility of the sound, mediocre judgment; the capacity to elaborate alternatives and gauge their consequences with the executive stance. (Mills 1956/2000: 356)

In their hegemonic battle, the elites intentionally forgot the majority's views; 'little,' ordinary people who teach their offspring and make their living to the best of their abilities. Thus, Mills (1958) demanded that it was the intellectuals' task to speak on behalf of ordinary people and speak truth to power.

The Violence of Organized Forgetting

Mills did not want to be alone in his criticism and claimed that it was the task of his fellow intellectuals to interpret the world and try to stop the madness. Among these critics was a group of established scientists who drafted a text called 'The Russell–Einstein Manifesto' (Einstein and Russel 1955). Published in London, the 'Manifesto' was Bernard Russell's initiative after his famous BBC radio speech, 'Man's Peril,' on 23 December 1954 (Russel 2003). For several years before the talk, Russell had been concerned with potentially catastrophic consequences of the existence and use of a thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb.

In his speech, Russell emphasized that he was talking 'not as a Briton, not as a European, not as a member of a Western democracy, but as a human being, a member of the species Man, whose continued existence is in doubt' (Russell 2003: 86). He then described the power of the H-bomb in detail and ended the speech with the following words worth quoting at length.

As geological time is reckoned, Man has so far existed only for a very short period—a million years at the most. What he has achieved, especially during the last 6,000 years, is something utterly new in the history of the Cosmos, so far at least as we are acquainted with it. For countless ages the sun rose and

set, the moon waxed and waned, the stars shone in the night, but it was only with the coming of Man that these things were understood. In the great world of astronomy and in the little world of the atom, Man has unveiled secrets which might have been thought undiscoverable. In art and literature and religion, some men have shown a sublimity of feeling which makes the species worth preserving. Is all this to end in trivial horror because so few are able to think of Man rather than of this or that group of men? Is our race so destitute of wisdom, so incapable of impartial love, so blind even to the simplest dictates of self-preservation, that the last proof of its silly cleverness is to be the extermination of all life on our planet?—for it will be not only men who will perish, but also the animals, whom no one can accuse of Communism or anti-Communism. I cannot believe that this is to be the end. I would have men forget their quarrels for a moment and reflect that, if they will allow themselves to survive, there is every reason to expect the triumphs of the future to exceed immeasurably the triumphs of the past. There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? I appeal, as a human being to human beings: remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, nothing lies before you but universal death. (Russell 2003: 88–89)

Based on these thoughts, ‘The Russell–Einstein Manifesto’ (Einstein and Russel 1955) urged people to learn in a new way to think and act: ‘We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is: what steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?’ The Manifesto ended with the following resolution:

In view of the fact that in any future world war nuclear weapons will certainly be employed, and that such weapons threaten the continued existence of mankind, we urge the governments of the world to realise, and to acknowledge publicly, that their purpose cannot be furthered by a world war, and we urge them, consequently, to find peaceful means for the settlement of all matters of dispute between them. (Einstein and Russel 1955)

With the imminent threat of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine (see Putin 2022), ‘The Russell–Einstein Manifesto’ (Einstein and Russel 1955) is today perhaps even more relevant than in 1955. Yet who remembers ‘The Russell–Einstein Manifesto’ these days? It took me some effort to dig the Manifesto from my memory, and I don’t believe I’m the only one suffering from the same problem. Some aspects of this organized forgetting are political, as the power elites don’t want the masses to recall messages of critical human emancipation (Giroux 2014). Others are ‘infrastructural,’ as our postdigital context develops at a speed that makes it very difficult to look back (Jandrić et al. 2018). Thus, we must run ever faster to stay still.

There is a general tendency in our society and the humanities and social sciences to focus on ‘new’ research—almost as if the publication date is somehow related to the validity and applicability of its conclusions (Jandrić 2020). In one of his lectures,

the 1959 Nobel peace prize winner Philip Noel-Baker said: ‘Imagination is one of the least developed human faculties. The strongest is that of forgetfulness.’ (Jungk 1985) The mechanics of organized forgetting has radically transformed in our post-digital age, yet ‘the violence of organized forgetting’ (Giroux 2014) is as poisonous as ever. So, what is to be done about it here and now?

Some Thoughts on the Role of the Postdigital Public Intellectual

Significant human achievements often seem to end in the dustbin of amnesia. Researchers publish thousands of texts every day, but after a while, with a few notable exceptions, most of these texts are buried in archives. An essential task of post-digital scholars, and a burden worth of Sisyphus, is to keep track of critical societal and political issues and research achievements and to teach them to new generations. This applies to all fields of inquiry; given my area of interest, I will focus on the humanities and social sciences.

Our interpretive task as social scientists is to name the conflict. If the war in Ukraine is not about the two opposing ideological camps (as in the Cold War), then what is it about? We need to analyze media-mediated interpretations of war from all sides carefully. We must bear witness and document the conditions of war, casualties, collateral damages, and peoples’ everyday life in the war zone and elsewhere.

As postdigital public intellectuals (Ford and Jandrić 2019; Peters et al. 2021), we need to align with local social scientists who work amid the war; with social movements and aid organizations inside and outside the conflict areas. We should actively participate in writing, public speaking, teaching, debating, marching, demonstrating, and choosing other active roles in the conflicts. We need to acknowledge the formation of the current ‘macrostructural unconscious,’ understand how ideologies constitute our everyday lives and how that understanding ‘enables us to reflect upon why we acquiesce to the root-and-branch deceptions of the corporate media, who possess all the latest technologies for manufacturing our loyalty to them and the capitalist class which they serve’ (McLaren 2022).

These are among the means to try to prevent us from falling into the ‘universal suicidal folly’ (Russell 2003) of the final apocalypse.

In the same way, as Bertrand Russell and his comrades before and after him fought against the threat of a nuclear war that would wipe out humanity, we as critical scholars should not tolerate the current hostilities between the existing economic and atomic superpowers. It has always amazed me how political ideologies nurture us to believe and act mindlessly against our common good and put us against each other. To me, this is the most foolish thing there is.

In search of understanding, I think of the combined power of reckless neoliberal capitalism, nationalism, and individualism as an ideological apparatus that, at the moment, seems overwhelming. Henry Giroux has called this apparatus a ‘disimagination machine.’ It imposes ‘forms of civic decay, moral irresponsibility, and political corruption while legitimating and rewarding ignorance, commodification, privatization, and crass selfishness over those values that generate trust, cooperation, critical

thinking, compassion, social responsibility, and the common good' (Giroux 2022: 27). The apparatus has resulted in the new rise of the permanent arms economy and the military–industrial complex, combining economic, political, and administrative interests (Mandel 1975). Also, the work of the disimagination machine often includes fantasies that the other side of the conflict is somehow noble while the other is evil. This line of thinking is purely simple-minded and incredibly dangerous (see Sachs 2022).

These terms and concepts are abstract and often vague, as are many others such as neoliberalism and individualism. Social scientists often use these terms and concepts, yet they often obscure many dimensions of human experience, not least the experience of war, terror, rape, and torture. They do not reveal the vicious experience of human suffering and inhuman treatment. Our powers as social scientists are often limited, and our margins of freedom are usually narrow. Yet even under these circumstances, can we silence the drums of war and consider eliminating human suffering in all its forms as our most important task?

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