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The deafening silence of intellectuals in the face of growing global conflicts

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Intellectuals do not have a monopoly on culture, on values, or on truth, much less on the meanings attributed to any one of these “domains of the spirit,” as they used to be termed. But intellectuals should also not shrink from denouncing what they see as destructive of culture, values, and truth, notably when such destruction claims to be carried out in the name of these “domains of spirit.” Intellectuals are not to refrain from saluting the sun before daybreak, but neither should they refrain from warning against the clouds ominously gathering in the sky before nightfall, preventing daylight from being enjoyed.

Europe is witnessing an alarming (re)emergence of two realities that are destructive of the “domains of the spirit”: the destruction of democracy, brought about by the growth of political forces of the far right; and the destruction of peace, brought about by the naturalization of war. Both destructions are legitimized by the very values each of them aims to destroy: fascism is promoted in the name of democracy; war is promoted in the name of peace. All of this has become possible because the political initiative and presence in the media are being relinquished to conservative forces on the right and far right. Social protection measures aimed at making people feel both in their pockets and their daily existence that democracy is better than dictatorship are becoming ever more rare precisely because of the costs of the war in Ukraine and because the

economic sanctions against the “enemy,” which supposedly should be hurting their intended target, are in fact hurting above all the European people whose governments have allied themselves with the US. The destruction of peace and democracy is mostly affected by the unequal and parallel drawing of two circles of warranted freedoms, i.e., freedoms of expression and freedoms of action endorsed by the political and media powers that be. The circle of freedoms warranted in the case of progressive positions advocating for just and durable peace and more inclusive democracy is getting smaller and smaller, while the circle of freedoms warranted in the case of conservative positions advocating for war and fascist polarization together with neoliberal economic inequality does not cease to grow. Progressive commentators are increasingly absent from the major media outlets, while every week conservative ones present us with page after page of staggering mediocrity.

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Let us look at some of the main symptoms of this vast process currently underway:

1) The information war over the Russia-Ukraine conflict has so taken hold of published opinion that even commentators with a modicum of conservative common sense have submitted to it with sickening subservience. Here's one example among many from the European corporate media: during his weekly appearance on a Portuguese TV channel (SIC, January 29, 2023), Luís Marques Mendes, a well-known commentator, usually a voice of common sense within the conservative camp, said something to this effect: "Ukraine has to win the war, because if it doesn't, Russia will invade other European countries." This is pretty much what American television viewers hear from MSNBC's Rachel Maddow on a daily basis. Where does such an absurd idea come from, if not from an overdose of misinformation? Have they forgotten that post-Soviet Russia sought to join NATO and the EU but was rebuffed, and that, contrary to what had been promised to the former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev, NATO expansion on Russia's borders may constitute a legitimate defense concern on the part of Russia, even if the invasion of Ukraine is indeed illegal, as I myself repeatedly denounced from day one? Don't they know that it was the US and the United Kingdom who boycotted the first peace negotiations shortly after the war broke out? Have the commentators not considered, even for a moment, that a nuclear power that finds itself faced with the possibility of defeat in a conventional conflict might resort to using its nuclear weapons, which in turn could lead to nuclear catastrophe? Don't they see that two nationalisms, one Ukrainian, and the other Russian, are being exploited in the war in Ukraine to force Europe into total dependence on the US and to stop the expansion of China, the country with which the US is really at war? Don't the commentators realize that today's Ukraine is tomorrow's Taiwan? Curiously enough, no details are ever offered, in the midst of all this ventriloquistic propaganda

fever, regarding what a defeat of Russia will mean; will it lead to the ousting of Russian President Vladimir Putin or to the balkanizing of Russia?

2) The anti-communist ideology that dominated the Western world until the 1990s is being surreptitiously recycled to promote anti-Russian hatred to the point of hysteria, even though it is a known fact that Putin is an autocratic leader, a friend of the European right and far right. Russian artists, musicians, and athletes are being banned from events, even as courses on Russian culture and literature—which are no less European than French literature and culture—are being terminated. In the wake of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, with its strategy of humiliating Germany after its loss during World War I, German writers were barred from attending the first meeting of the annual PEN Congress, held in May 1923. The only dissenting voice was that of Romain Rolland, who won the 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature. Despite everything he had written against the war and German war crimes in particular, Rolland had the courage to say, “in the name of intellectual universalism”: “I will not subject my thinking to the tyrannical and demented fluctuations of politics.”

3) Democracy is being so emptied of meaning that it can be instrumentally defended by those who use it in order to destroy it. At the same time, those who serve democracy to strengthen it against fascism are labeled radical leftists. At the international level, the West unanimously applauded the 2014 events of Kyiv’s Maidan square, which is where the current war truly began. Despite the fact that the flags of Nazi organizations were in plain sight during the protests; despite the fact that popular rage was directed against a democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich then; and despite the fact that, according to wiretaps, Victoria Nuland, the US neoconservative and then-assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs,

had explicitly named the people who were to wield power in case of victory, including an American citizen, Natalie Jaresko, who later served as Ukraine's new minister of finance from 2014 to 2016; despite all this, these events, which amounted to a well-orchestrated coup aimed at removing a pro-Russian president and turning Ukraine into a US protectorate, were celebrated throughout the West as a vibrant victory for democracy. In fact, none of this was quite as absurd as the fact that when Juan Guaidó, a Venezuelan opposition figure, proclaimed himself interim president of Venezuela in a public square in Caracas in 2019, it was enough for the US, along with many EU countries, to recognize him as such. In December 2022, the Venezuelan opposition itself put an end to this farce.

4) The double standard for assessing what happens in the world is taking on aberrant proportions and is being used in a quasi-automatic fashion to strengthen the war apologists, stigmatize the parties of the left, and normalize fascists. Examples are legion, so the difficulty lies in choosing among them. Let me offer just a couple of illustrations from the national and international contexts. In Portugal, the raucous and offensive behavior of the members of Chega, the far-right party, is very similar to the behavior of the deputies of Germany's Nazi party from the moment they entered the Reichstag in the early 1920s. Attempts were made to stop them, but the political initiative belonged to the Nazi party and the economic situation was on their side. As early as May 1933, the Nazi party held its first book burning, in Berlin. How long will it be until it happens in Portugal? Largely backed by US counterinsurgency institutions, the position of today's global right vis-à-vis leftist governments is that, whenever the latter cannot be overthrown by soft coups, they must be worn down by accusations of corruption and forced to grapple with issues of governability so that they are prevented from governing strategically. It would appear that corruption in Portugal is confined to the Socialist Party, which secured an outright majority in the last election in 2022. In the

eyes of the hegemonic conservative media, every minister in the Socialist Party government is presumed corrupt until proven otherwise. It shouldn't be hard to find similar examples in other countries.

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From the international context, I will mention two glaring examples. There is now a general consensus that the September 2022 explosion of the Nord Stream gas pipelines was the work of the US (and was allegedly “overseen” by President Joe Biden, a claim he denied), which was possibly assisted by allies. An incident of this magnitude should have been immediately investigated by an independent international commission. What seems obvious is that the aggrieved party—Russia—had no interest in destroying an infrastructure that they could make useless by just turning off the tap. On February 8, Seymour Hersh, a respected American journalist, used conclusive information to show that the sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and 2 had in fact been planned by the US since December 2021. If that was indeed the case, we have before us a heinous crime that is also an act of state terrorism. The US, which claims to be the champion of global democracy, should be supremely interested in finding out what happened. Was this the only way to force Germany to join the war against Russia? Was the sabotaging of the gas pipelines intended to put an end to Europe's

policy, initiated by former Chancellor of Germany Willy Brandt, of being less energy-dependent on the US? In the context of expensive energy and closed-down businesses, was this not an effective way of putting the brakes on the EU's economic engine? Who benefits from the situation? Heavy silence hangs over this act of state terrorism.

The other example of glaring double standards is the violence of the Israeli colonial occupation of Palestine which is intensifying. Israel killed 35 Palestinians in January 2023 alone; in a raid carried out on January 26 in the Jenin refugee camp, in the West Bank, Israel killed 10 people. One day later, a Palestinian youth killed seven people outside the synagogue of a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, an area illegally occupied by Israel. There is violence on both sides of the conflict, but the disproportion is overwhelming, and many acts of terrorism by the State of Israel (sometimes committed with impunity by the settlers or by soldiers at checkpoints) do not even make the news. There are no Western media correspondents to report on what is happening in the occupied territories, which is where most of the violence takes place. Except for furtive cellphone footage, we do not have gut-wrenching images of suffering and death on the Palestinian side. The international community and the Arab world have kept quiet on this matter. Despite the hugely disproportionate means of warfare, there is no movement to send effective military equipment to Palestine, as is currently the case with Ukraine. Why is Ukraine's a just resistance, but Palestinian resistance is not? Europe, the continent where the Holocaust that killed millions of Jews took place, is ultimately at the root of the crimes committed against Palestine, but nowadays it shares an odious complicity with Israel. The EU is currently hurrying to create a court to try war crimes, but—and herein lies the hypocrisy—only those committed by Russia. Just as in the years leading up to World War I, the appeals to Europeanism (pan-Europe, as it was called back then) are increasingly becoming calls to war and leading to

rhetoric aimed at concealing the unjust suffering and the loss of well-being now being imposed on the European people without them having been consulted on the need for, or advantages of, the Russia-Ukraine war.

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5) Today, we witness a confrontation between US, Russian, and Chinese imperialism. There is also the pathological case of the United Kingdom, which, notwithstanding its abysmal social and political decline, has not yet realized that the British Empire has long ended. I am against all imperialism, and I admit that Russian or Chinese imperialism may prove to be the most dangerous ones in the future, but there is no doubt in my mind that, with its military and financial superiority, US imperialism is at the moment the most dangerous of all. Of course, none of this is enough to guarantee its longevity. In fact, I have been arguing, based on sources from North American institutions (such as the National Intelligence Council), that it is an empire in decline, but it may be that its very decline is one of the factors that help explain why it is especially dangerous these days.

I have condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the start, but since that moment I have also pointed out that the US had actively provoked Russia into this conflict, with the purpose of weakening Russia and containing China. The dynamics of US imperialism seem unstoppable, fueled by the perpetual belief that the destruction it causes, furthers, or incites will take place far from its borders, protected as the country is by two vast oceans. The US claims that its interventions are invariably for the good of democracy, but the truth is that it ends up leaving in its wake a path of destruction, dictatorship, or chaos. The most recent and probably most extreme manifestation of this ideology can be found in the latest book by the neoconservative Robert Kagan (Victoria Nuland's husband), titled *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941* (Alfred Knopf, 2023). The book's central idea is that the US—in its desire to bring greater happiness, freedom, and wealth to other nations, fighting corruption and tyranny wherever they exist—is a unique country. The US is so prodigiously powerful that it would have avoided World War II if only it had had the chance to intervene militarily and financially in time to force Germany, Italy, Japan, France, and Great Britain to follow the new US-led world order. Every US intervention overseas has been driven by altruistic motives, for the good of the people at whom the intervention is directed. According to Kagan, US military interventions overseas—from the time of the Spanish-American War of 1898 (fought with the purpose, still felt to this day, of dominating Cuba) and the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 (fought to prevent the self-determination of the Philippines, which resulted in more than 200,000 Filipino deaths)—have always been inspired by unselfish notions and for the desire to help people.

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This hypocrisy and erasure of inconvenient truths does not even consider the tragic reality of the Indigenous peoples and the Black population of the US, who were subjected to ferocious extermination and discrimination during those times of supposedly liberating interventions abroad. The historical record exposes the cruelty of such mendacity. US interventions have invariably been dictated by the country’s geopolitical and economic interests. In fact, the US is no exception to the rule. On the contrary, this has always been the case with every empire (see, for example, the invasions of Russia by Napoleon and Adolf Hitler). The historical record shows that the precedence of imperial interests has often led to the suppression of aspirations for self-determination, freedom, and democracy and the extension of support to murderous dictators, with the ensuing devastation and death, from the Banana Wars in Nicaragua (1912), the support to Cuban dictator Fulgêncio Batista, or the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion to the coup against former Chilean President Salvador Allende (1973); from the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, the former democratically elected president of Iran (1953) to the coup against Jacobo Árbenz, the former democratically elected president of Guatemala (1954); from the invasion of Vietnam to fight the communist threat (1965) to the invasion of Afghanistan (2001), allegedly as a defensive move against the terrorists who attacked New York’s twin towers (none of whom

was from Afghanistan)—following 20 years of US support to the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union-backed communist government in Kabul; from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to take down Saddam Hussein and destroy his (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction to the intervention in Syria to defend rebels who, for the most part, were (and are) radical Islamists; from the 1995 intervention in the Balkans, carried out through NATO without UN authorization, to the 2011 destruction of Libya. There have always been “benevolent reasons” for such interventions, which always relied on accomplices and allies at the local level. What will remain of martyred Ukraine when the war ends (because all wars end eventually)? What will be the situation in the other European countries, notably Germany and France, which remain dominated by the false notion that the Marshall Plan was the manifestation of self-sacrificing philanthropy on the part of the US, to whom they owe infinite gratitude and unconditional solidarity? And what about Russia? What will a final assessment look like, beyond all the death and destruction that come with every war? Why don't we witness the emergence, in Europe, of a strong movement in favor of a just and lasting peace? Could it be that, despite the fact that the war is being fought in Europe, Europeans are waiting for some anti-war movement to emerge in the US, so they can join it with good conscience and without the risk of being viewed as friends of Putin, or even as communists?

Why so much silence about all this?

Perhaps the most incomprehensible silence is that of the intellectuals. It is incomprehensible because intellectuals frequently claim to be more percipient than ordinary mortals. History has taught us that, in the periods immediately before the outbreak of wars, all politicians declare themselves against the war while contributing to it by virtue of their actions. Silence is nothing short of complicity with the masters of war. Contrary

to what happened at the beginning of the 20th century, there are now no well-known intellectuals making resounding declarations for peace, “independence of spirit,” and democracy. Three imperialisms coexisted when World War I broke out: Russian, English, and Prussian imperialism. No one doubted that Prussian imperialism was the most aggressive of the three.

Intriguingly, no major German intellectuals were heard speaking out against the war at that time. The case of Thomas Mann is worthy of reflection. In November 1914, he published an article in *Neue Rundschau* titled “*Gedanken im Kriege*” (Thoughts in Wartime), in which he defended war as an act of “*Kultur*” (i.e., Germany, as he himself clarified) against civilization. In his view, *Kultur* was the sublimation of the demonic (“*die Sublimierung des Dämonischen*”) and was above morality, reason, and science. Mann concluded by writing that “Law is the friend of the weak; it would reduce the world to a level. War brings out strength” (“*Das Gesetz ist der Freund des Schwachen, möchte gern die Welt verflachen, aber der Krieg läßt die Kraft erscheinen*”). Mann viewed *Kultur* and militarism as brothers. In 1918-1920, he published *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, a book in which he defended the Kaiser’s policies and claimed that democracy was an anti-German idea. Fortunately for humanity, Thomas Mann would later change his mind and become one of the most vocal critics of Nazism. In contrast, from Peter Kropotkin to Leo Tolstoy and from Fyodor Dostoyevsky to Maxim Gorky, the voices of Russian intellectuals raised against Russian imperialism never failed to make themselves heard.

There are many questions intellectuals have an obligation to address. Why have they stayed silent? Are there still intellectuals, or have they become weak shadows of what they once stood for?

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