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The West at war: civil strife and reconciliation in the time of the culture war

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We live in a time of war. So it seems. So it palpably *feels* to those who live in these times. But this intuition of doom, which feels near universal, seems to be contradicted by empirical reality. Twenty three years into the 20th century the world had fought a catastrophic, illusion-shattering world war, from whose dark heart boiled forth the totalitarian ideologies of communism and fascism. Twenty three years into our century, by contrast, we are all living longer, poverty has declined worldwide, and for all the heart wracking conflicts of our era, for the West there is nothing to compare even to Korea or Vietnam, no equivalent of the Soviet menace, and every indication that we are in a time of small, nasty wars rather than all consuming holocausts of total global conflict. Yet this discordance between a pervasive sense of calamity, and

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a lack of concrete objects for our dread, actually worsens our feelings. Like the suspense in a horror film, tension only builds, apocalypse seems to lurk like Chekhov's gun, waiting for its inevitable trigger.

We feel this constant sense of crisis not, I think, because we face worse threats in the 21st century, but because we feel naked before them. The echoes to the crises of 100 years ago resonate because after the silence of the guns was the hollowness of a once ascendent liberal politics. We have passed, following the culmination of the cold war, through another period of liberal triumphalism in the shape of the War on Terror. Though far less costly than the Great War, it was perhaps as or more cynical in its basis and conduct. The primary result of this monstrous civilisational overreach was the confusion of combatant, criminal and civilian, which authorised not only drone assassination overseas, but mass surveillance and the compromise of civil liberties at home.

War is seductive, because it offers a clear dividing line, a violent binary ordering that seems to promise the restoration of moral clarity and collective identity. For the Western powers, the chaos of the 1930s receded in the face of another war that was all the first hadn't been – a shining crusade in place of the muddied chalice. The simplifying totalitarianisms performed their clarifying task, even if only to successfully play the villain – first in WW2, then in the Cold War. The ugliness and confusions of these conflicts were strategically forgotten, at least enough to usefully sustain the myth.

Western liberal identity, for so long negatively defined as not Fascism and Communism, is coming apart. As inevitable as this dissolution was, there is much to mourn about the loss of solidarity and the widespread demoralisation it has ushered in its wake. Christianity and working class politics were integral elements in the Cold War effort. There are few better places to tell this story than where I stand today, the seminary where St John Paul II studied. Civil liberty, economic justice and Christian civilisation were bound together in a struggle against Communism, an alliance embodied in the Solidarity movement, and well symbolised by a straightforwardly beloved and popular Pope. Where, as panellists asked so powerfully yesterday, is Solidarity now? Poland, as much or more than Atlantic states, is caught up in the frustrated hopes of Cold War victory.²

2 David Ost, "The Triumph and Tragedy of Poland's Solidarity Movement", *Jacobin Magazine*, 8th August 2020, <https://jacobin.com/2020/08/poland-solidarity-communism-solidar-nosc>.

The logic of binary division that seemed to build our strength, confidence and solidarity so well has been turned inwards with a vengeance. Those on the progressive Left have chosen the chimaera of “white supremacy” and attendant “Eurocentrism” as its new villain, one that lurks, conveniently, in every part of our history, culture and politics. Progressives have thus, in their turn, usefully been transformed into the bogeymen of the right, setting up a mutually reinforcing logic of hostility that we label the “culture war”.

But whereas the great evil Other was a spur to relative unity in the Cold War, today’s villains are not the German over the hill or even the Red under the bed. Indeed, if the gender breakdown of contemporary right/left politics is to be believed, a not inconsiderable number of people are waking up next to the enemy. Rather than building solidarity, the culture war relentlessly butchers the body politic, sundering rural from urban, young from old, worker from professional, man from woman. Whilst the old divisions of class were open to negotiation and oriented towards material reconciliation, these contemporary divides are tangled up in irresolvable issues of identity, culture and social policy.

Here then is the root of our pervasive anxiety – Agamben calls it *stasis*, the ancient Greek term for civil strife. It can mean a literal battle, but as philosophers like Plato define it, a polity that is divided by faction is effectively two different states at war, and there is in a sense no real body politic at all when it stands divided. Agamben plays upon the double meanings of the term in his book, describing our contemporary condition as a kind of global civil war, in which everything is “internal” yet there is no convening body or responsible class that can bring resolution or sense, except for biopolitical “regulation” – a mode of anti-politics.³

Writing in 2015, Agamben predicts the dystopian biopolitics of the pandemic, seeing in the liberal logic of Hobbesian sovereignty an emergency state in which the citizen recedes to be replaced by an “unrepresentable multitude” which “can be represented only through the guards who monitor its obedience and the doctors who treat it. It dwells in the city, but only as the object of the duties and concerns of those who exercise the sovereignty”.

3 See Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (Stanford, CA, 2015), trans. Nicholas Heron, and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, 1998), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen.

Robbed of foes but beset by numinous threat, we are victims of a globalisation that has rendered the weltgeist as poltergeist; a worldwide haunting. We ourselves – the mass of unrepresented and unrepresentable people – become a sinister mass, the ghostly force of destabilising “populism”.

How do we navigate such extraordinary ambiguity? How do we take political and moral action in a world in which responsibility is diffused into the atmosphere, and even national elites can be reduced to servants of an invisible global disorder? The Christian life seems hopelessly obscured, nevermind Christian politics.

This time of apparently maximal anxiety is, as Kierkegaard tells us⁴, equally a maximally productive and significant moment. It is the recognition of our own freedom, the falling away of limit, and at the same time the cognizance of sin. It is the starting point for us to recapture our humanity and truly build a Christian politics. But how does despair become transmuted into hope?

There’s an idea that comes from the same ancient world that gave us *stasis*, and shares a linguistic root: *aristeia*. It is an ideal of martial nobility realised amidst the horror and randomness of war, often attained in the moment before death, and expressed most poignantly in the *Iliad*. In her work on the poem, Simone Weil suggests that “the purest triumph of love, the crowning grace of war, is the friendship that floods the hearts of mortal enemies”. In that moment “the distance between benefactor and suppliant, between victor and vanquished, shrinks to nothing”.

Our current moment of existential confusion and division throws us back to the very origins of what we call the West. In *Rome: The First Book of Foundations*, Michel Serres speaks of the founding moment of Rome, in which the pathwork tribes and refugees of Romulus’ city, desperate for brides, decide to lure the Sabines with a religious festival and abduct their daughters. This is war as pure chaos, blasphemy on a holy day, a betrayal of guests, the introduction of violence and the alien to the heart of the polity, a household battle.⁵ How is it resolved? The women.

War artificially divides, then artificially confuses; clean division gives way to universal fragmentation. “The women, bareheaded, semi-naked, throw themselves between the lines”. In the tragedy of the *Iliad*, Helen of Troy

4 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton MA, 1992), trans. Howard and Edna Hong.

5 Michel Serres, *Rome: The First Book of Foundations* (Oxford, 2015), trans. Randolph Burks.

is reduced to a trophy, or maligned as a seductress careless of her power. From her passivity and submission, the annihilation of Troy is borne. In her daughter city Rome, the tragedy of Helen's abduction threatens to be repeated – "Helen of Troy translated into multiplicity". But something shifts. "They are introduced into the war system; they make it rock, bifurcate. Emotion wins out; silence falls, calm spreads; a treaty is concluded. The Sabines are invited to join with the Romans; the two states will be made one, governed by two kings. Yes: hospitality at first turned into hostility; by the same operator, hostility turns into hospitality."

Peace, not violence, citizenship, not conquest, reasserts itself as the ordering principle, by its reconciliation of apparent opposites, by a weaving and a binding action. In the maximal moment of crisis, the Sabine women chose the role of Penelope over Helen, and saved the state. The city in civil war is the supreme school of the statesman, as Plato writes in his *Laws*

The greatest good is not victory in war, whether civil or external, but mutual peace and good-will, as in the body health is preferable to the purgation of disease. He who makes war his object instead of peace, or who pursues war except for the sake of peace, is not a true statesman.

For Plato the statesmen who bring civil peace are greater than military heroes, because "in a civil war, not only courage, but justice and temperance and wisdom are required, and all virtue is better than a part".

Civil, and for us, civilisational, strife is the supreme test of the citizen's virtue because it forces us into inner conflict against our most dangerous spiritual tendencies. In the progressive worship of individual autonomy, and the neoliberal *homo economicus*, we find a pure politics of appetite, a perverse eros that assaults human dignity, and leads, as Plato long ago warned us, to tyranny by those who cater to our desires. We now give the name "liberty" to a rule by a perverse eros that kills body and mind, whilst enriching the elite.

More alert to this danger are figures of the dissident right, but they are falling into a temptation that Plato was no less alert to. Force, so expertly diagnosed by Weil, is related to the "spirited" aspect of the soul that Plato names *thumos*,⁶ and in its right place orders and disciplines the soul by curbing and

6 See Plato, *Republic* and Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*.

directing our appetites. But when force alone rules the state, the city becomes a barracks, and we are left with a timocracy, which inevitably degenerates into the worship of power for its own sake.

The ship of state hopelessly founders unless a skilled navigator takes the tiller – the philosopher king. This apparently grand phrasing has misled generations of political thinkers, typified by Karl Popper, to dismiss Plato as calling for idealistic authoritarian expert rule. But as the dialogues of *Statesmen* and *Laws* explore, the “philosopher king” is a provocative binary, two apparently opposed poles that when united bring us the figure of the statesman. Modelled on the likes of Solon, the statesman is a lawgiver and a mediator far more than he is an autocrat. Indeed, the good statesman is seeking to create free citizens, and rules by consent and persuasion.

Desire is not, in the way Freud understood it, suppressed; rather force and desire are both governed by a loving reason that directs them towards the higher *Eros* that Christians will fully name and explore as *caritas*. Our individual sense of existential dislocation and fragmentation, powerfully reflected by TS Eliot 100 years ago in *The Wasteland*, is like that of a ship caught in the madness of the waves:

A current under sea
 Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth
 Entering the whirlpool.⁷

How do we answer such chaos?
 Gentile or Jew
 O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
 Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.⁸

It is a *memento mori*, but also a reminder of the chaos of the world and desire, of “profit and loss”. To remember death is to “look to windward”, and to place yourself on an eternal horizon. In real life sailing, ships “tack

7 From: T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*.

8 From: T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*.

to windward”, sailing *into* the wind that is against them by zig zagging diagonally towards it.

In analogical terms this interweaving motion can be read as the liturgical rhythm of a life lived oriented towards God. We do not directly approach the throne, but rather seek a harmony and a balance in the soul between contemplative and active lives; *ora et labora*. This balance operates no less at the political level in the harmonisation of different vocations and characters, classes and cultures.

We must replace the false clarity of the divisions of the physical battlefield with the invisible line between good and evil, heaven and hell, which as Solzhenitsyn wrote, “passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts.”⁹ This is also the boundary, as Augustine wrote, between the City of God on “pilgrimage” in the world, and the City of Man, which is governed by appetite and the devil. We do not and cannot know who is a citizen, with all the saints and angels, of the heavenly city, and who is a member of the earthly – certainly we inhabit both cities in this life.¹⁰

Civil strife, then, is not only a political, but a metaphysical reality. Yet in the integrity of the soul and the strength of our relationships, enlivened and made fertile by divine grace, we have the perpetual seeds of hope and redemption. Pope Francis’ call in *Laudato Si* for a democratic renewal – “ecological citizenship” – linked to a revival of social and spiritual harmony, shines a light on the necessary path ahead of us.¹¹

Caught in the storm, and assailed by civil strife, peace must first be won in the heart of the combatant; worldly triumph crowned by the reconciliation which is a victory in eternity. The challenge of our present civilisational *stasis* can be met only by a slow spiritual warfare, the building up of virtue; the making of Christian citizens and statesmen and women capable of bringing coherence to chaos. Fragmented and lost, the West is in another founding moment – a time of great danger yes, but also a precious opportunity for re-foundation, renewal and redemption.



9 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

10 Augustine, *Civitas Dei*.

11 Franciszek, Encyklika *Laudato si*, 211.

