

THE WAR MACHINE: NIETZSCHE CONTRA PSYCHOANALYSIS



In his second book, *The War Machine*, subtitled 'the rationalisation of slaughter in the modern world', some of what he is doing becomes clearer. One may be initially impressed by the erudition, & a scrupulous concern to avoid judgements.

He sets out 'to explore a world of representations which sets in play a "common sense" & a debate about wars, states, & states of mind, which is still very much contemporary for us, or at least upon which we still draw' (p. 18). He examines a variety of writings, from the 1830s to the 1930s, loosely linked by the theme of war.

He ranges among philosophers, social scientists, journalists, popular fiction, war propaganda. Much of what he finds are commonplaces that could come from almost any period. More interesting to a historian is some that was unique to the period leading up to the war, the idea of an unstoppable rush towards war. He explores the idea of the First World War as a

disaster expressing forces beyond conscious control, many of which he finds in the ideas & opinions of the writers of which he treats. Accordingly he presents much of the culture of a century ago, including some of the considered thought of the most eminent writers of their day, essentially as unhealthy delusions, though not in so many words. He sees a problem of why so many people sought to justify war.

“...my principle concern lies in the interrelations & reverberations between these writings; the aim is indeed to convey the reader into a kind of echo chamber of historical thought on war”.

The writers mentioned, each have very different things to say. Spencer's anti militarism comes in for as much implicit disapproval as von Treitschke's nationalistic bellicosity; in common is the implied wrongheadedness many of their assumptions, which are treated as rationalisations. This wrongheadedness is not made explicit. The impression meant to be given is that we are placed in a complex discourse, looking to see what illumination any of these might throw on our subject. They seem like heresies in that they all contain partial truths but “we are all guilty”. There are ideas that both contain a measure of illumination, & are themselves a part of the problem. There is the aim of involving us in the discourse. He is not doing just bare history, or historiography. This is material for present discussion, how to think & write about war.

The fragmentary nature of many of these ideas as he presents them, means there is no space to criticise them in detail. So they come across as a disconnected assemblage of hypotheses, which are either attractive or repellent. Where there is no

prima facie scientific basis for rejection, then it can look as if we are free to adopt whatever we find attractive.

Pick evidently has firm opinions about what ideas ought not to prevail. If so many ideas are wrong, others must be right, so we would like to know precisely what for him these sound ideas are, & what is the rational basis for preferring them, perhaps against our immediate inclinations.

Much of the material treated might be criticised as pseudo science, basing elaborate structures of supposed truth on seriously inadequate foundations, such as the science of eugenics, & racist theories. However this objection is only as powerful as it might be if what has replaced these ideas is clearly much sounder. It is not difficult to expose as pseudo science, a whole range of politically incorrect ideas from the past, nationalist, elitist, anti feminist, racist, militaristic, illiberal. But that can hardly be the real objection. Are such attitudes rooted in any more false science than the ideas he favours, like the equality of sexes & races & cultures? Is it demonstrated that equal rights beliefs produce less false science than elitist principles? If they do, what is the explanation for it?

That the objectionable ideas, elitist, nationalist or militarist, are contrary to the principles of the modern, if not the 19th century, left, should be incidental, unless it has to be assumed in advance that we share those principles. The argument mostly implicit is the danger. Thought about war could be one of the factors that led to war. Avoidance of war is presumably a reasonable aim most of us would share. The implication is that these ways of thinking led to war, & some to Auschwitz. This gives a rationale for censorship and

political correctness. Such an argument should be fairly applied. One could easily propose equivalent arguments to serve opposite political ends. One might mention the fashionable Marxism Pol Pot and the other Khmer Rouge leaders picked up in Paris in the sixties. Egalitarian doctrines, not to mention dreams of collective prosperity & happiness, led to Stalin's massacres. One could easily descend to yah boo politics. The only important question is whether such ideas still present a danger.

Pick concentrates on the irrationality of the 1st world war, scarcely touching other ways of looking at it. He does not bother to refute arguments for the rationality of the struggle. He does not treat of the seriousness of the experience of total war, of the threat of foreign invasion & its reality, of fight for survival.

Without in any way committing ourselves, we can try to look honestly at other possible interpretations. On an alternative interpretation of the very same material, before 1914 there was cultural instability in Europe, with all kinds of conflicting programmes. In retrospect one may identify with some & despise others. The conflict really was fought out, whether or not it should have been. The war against Germany was completely won, not finally in 1918, but in 1945.

On such a view, contrary to Pick's insinuation, most of his research is irrelevant to present conditions, at least in the sense he claims for it. He says that he aims 'to call into question some of the cliches of our current discourse, the platitudes which still have their purchase today, their numbing & exonerating effect' & that 'Many of the writings surveyed here have profound resonances - much to say to us

about war & peace'. But this loses some of its force if no comparable danger exists today. If the war was a battle for domination on the part of the upstart German culture, & as such a struggle for the future of civilisation, then the revelation of the holocaust destroyed the German bid most effectively, once & for all, whatever conflicts & divisions remain within our society.

To treat the explicit issues inspiring the 1st world war as unworthy of serious consideration, is to refuse to play, but the game went on nonetheless, & historical conditions changed. Whether or not we see the war as irrational, real alternatives were fought over, & ultimately resolved. This can apply even on a pacifist view, whether we consider the aims of politicians or the feelings of those who fought.

In consequence interest in these ideas is not perilous, they are not to be handled only at arm's length, delving endlessly into basic assumptions in the effort to see how such contamination could ever have arisen. We can look squarely at the free speculations of an earlier era. We can even consider the supposed moral benefits of war, an idea virtually as old as civilisation, discussing this interesting opinion for what it is worth. If we reject it we should be able to put up an honest argument against it.

This looking for unconscious motives is the same method of not confronting causes head on. He emasculates many of the causes people have felt to be most important. Nationalistic ideas & sentiments he will only treat as symptoms. He even alludes to Moore & Russell's attack on Hegelianism, the fountainhead of a great philosophical movement, virtually as if this was part of some xenophobic syndrome, & they ought to have accepted

Hegel:- 'Hegel it was feared had polluted England. He was a philosophical force to be monitored, mopped up & sluiced away.....the continuing critique of, & anxiety about, the pernicious effects of German idealism, culminating in Moore & Russell's restoration of empiricism' (p. 133).

Evidently he favours Hegel whom he treats less as a symptom than a source of illumination. Hegel, he writes 'explained' that war 'is a means of binding the nation & starkly separating inner & outer, sameness & difference' (p. 133). Of course his real hero is Freud, who may well qualify as a pseudo scientist. He refers to Eysenck's attack on Freud, which he evidently resents. His defence of the latter involves treating Eysenck as a case study, pointing out his use of warlike metaphors. Presumably what pleasure I feel in the assault I am preparing on Pick's ideas, would be taken as bearing out some of his thesis. Freud's thought is to him of a different order from most of the other writers he discusses. 'Psychoanalysis cannot rightly be viewed as the mere recapitulation of earlier thought on war', he writes (p.265). That may be, but what is to give it its privileged status?

Between the heresies he depicts & his solutions, or explanations, what is the dividing line? What makes Freud & Hegel acceptable when so many other writers are patronised or effectively condemned? It is admitted that Freud is at times racist, & at times praises war. Obviously Freud is involved in whatever guilt attaches to such attitudes.

Presented with the question of what we are to think in terms of psychoanalytic thought on war, we may feel as if we have stumbled where we do not belong, like atheists at a Catholic convention. Though he says he has no thesis he begins from

Freud. The very intractability & difficulty of the problem suggests the need for a form of censorship. In a way that recalls the doctrine of original sin, Freud & Hegel themselves are not exempt from evil. He does not claim they are exempt, & this is part of the point he is trying to make.

The danger of certain lines of thought is that they can lead to catastrophe, yet their very attraction suggests they particularly express human instinct. Also most significantly he presents the idea that war actually offers release for aggressive drives, that find expression as an unconscious will to war. The lure of destructive ideas is something he wants to recognise. So psychoanalysis, in offering a form of therapy, also offers understanding. It says the psyche has such and such a character. Exploring the lure of rage and hatred in the psychoanalytic session, carries with it all the pride of hidden knowledge as well as the promise of catharsis. Suppose this knowledge is all illusion, expressing only the will to power of some particular group? Then the practice may amount to an extreme form of decadent self indulgence.

We can now see precisely the use to which he puts this Freudian concept of the death instinct. It is that there is a temptation in all these dangerous ideas, tempting precisely because they are dangerous. Therefore they are supposed to reveal something intrinsic to the human mind. Rather than taking them at face value, and trying to refute them, accepting that some causes flourish and others fail, they are seen as something to be managed like wild beasts that must be kept under restraint. The psychoanalytic perspective is claimed to reveal this destructive war machine, the motives that drive it, the ideas that lead to it and are part of it. These are conceived as expressions of desire. The tendency to form and favour such ideas is seen as something deep in human

nature. This is the self destructive flaw in man.

What plausibility this view possesses may be something to do with the way he presents the ideas, like a collection of disconnected hypotheses. In this way they can appear as dangerous temptations, appealing to destructive and aggressive impulses. But how can individual aggression create something like war? There is a problem of how individual hostility can find satisfaction in going to war, in being conscripted, bullied by sergeant majors, and all that involves. This is presumably susceptible of a Freudian explanation.

The 'war machine' hypothesis is not something defended, it is like a mosaic put together from other people's ideas. Some people thought there was this deranged machine, so he builds up this viewpoint. It acquires a huge moral claim because of its suggested application to some present threat of nuclear disaster. The hypothesis he has built up is a fact, in the sense that it is a possible construction of the facts. The Freudian pessimism is a hypothesis to explain the existence of this hypothesis.

From the belief that thought has this dangerous character, we seem to be led into a form of irrationalism, the principle that we are not to question some authority because to do so might have catastrophic consequences. This is to articulate a new form of pessimism to compare with Schopenhauer or Von Hartmann in the nineteenth century, one appropriate to our own age, with its characteristic concerns and dogmas. Theoretically one might imagine such a philosophy could become fashionable and find artistic expression. It is much more intellectualised than simple political correctness, which can seem merely frustrating in its crude moralism. Such

articulation is a creative achievement, a successful effort of will, it suggests its opposite, much as Nietzsche's philosophy was originally suggested by reflections on Schopenhauer. It can seem self refuting in its very rationality. If after Nietzsche pessimism was to be a whip to beat shallow optimists, perhaps a new pessimism could provide a new whip.

Pick goes far beyond Freud's death instinct hypothesis. His view is not simply that there is a drive to self destruction, but that even our efforts to understand our predicament are driven on a dangerous and self destructive course. The ideas we are attracted to are poisonous. We cannot trust our intuition, because we are inspired by a self destructive aggression, all the criminal and murderous urges that Freud finds in us. So we have to find an outlet for these, neutralise them, and on Freud's own principles this is to be on the analysts couch, where you chat away about all kinds of atrocious feelings that must never be allowed practical expression. The incorrect idea is therefore something like a murderous desire.

Against the Nietzschean point that most states of affairs involve the triumph of some cause, he would hold that his perspective is deeper. Unless we feel that our desires are dangerous, we have not understood, have not made contact with the forces that really move us. Self indulgence and censorship go together, for society as well as for the individual. This has consequences for how much freepiritedness we should be willing to accept. If thought were as uninhibited as it was in turn of the century Vienna, if we were as thoughtful and clever as 100 years ago, if we had a really brilliant intellectual and artistic culture, would that tend to generate war? Presumably, if we were to think in all the old patterns, but there is hardly any reason to imagine we would do that.

Censoring out the dangerous, we are apparently to accept politically correct ideas which may not fit well with our instincts and desires, but where are these to come from? One suspects the source may be Marx, but again this is not explicit. Pick's perspective of 'powerlessness' could easily be turned on himself. In any idea, there is possible weakness & possible strength, hope of success or fear of defeat. Using much the same material the most diverse points can be made. With the same perspective and the same material, we could easily produce alternative speculations of our own, undermining Pick's own values. Or is he underpinned by the power and strength of a coherent Marxism?

From a more Nietzschean viewpoint, arguments from dead controversies acquire a fresh kind of usefulness. There is a way of writing intellectual history which makes a central issue out of the rebellious demand for intellectual and spiritual freedom, a cause the value of which there are powerful interests to deny. With a motive to upset an actual or proposed consensus, itself likely to be the expression of the massed prejudices of comfortable mediocrity, there is liberation in exploring all dissident views. They can be allies in the fight against coercive dogma, against insidious efforts to win our assent to judgements which do not stand close logical examination. If once they seemed natural, & now they seem unnatural, that reflects our new situation, & is a large part of their interest for us. They need not be dangerous in the sense of leading us where we do not want to go. Knowing where we stand & what we want, committed to humane principles and the retention of our democratic freedoms, we can look without danger.