

# War in the Head

## Against the Militarization of Thought

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### Table of Contents

- Preface
- Toward a Governmentality of War
- Fortress Europe
- Ourselves as Enemies
- A Missed Opportunity, a Possibility Worth Rediscovering
- The Care of Peace
- From Person to Role: War as a Machine of Symbolic Annihilation
- Normalizing War to Govern Instability
- The Traps of Deterrence
- The Banalization of War and the New "Spirits" of Europe
- The Weaponisation of Discourse: A Cultural Analysis
- The End of a Certain Illusion? Bellicisation and the Myth of Western Civilization
- War of Words Against Outsiders
- The University of Peace and the Art of Human Relations: The Lesson of Virginia Woolf
- The University of War
- The New Military School
- Resilience: From Economic to Military Virtue
- Arm Yourself and March: The Intellectuals Who Stay Behind
- The Power of the Neutral: For a Politics of Equiproximity
- The Color of Wheat: For a Pedagogy of Peace
- What Peace is Made Of: From Tolerance to Desire
- The Quiet Ethics of the Just
- Critique and Clinic: Disarming Discourse, Caring for the World
- Merchant's Ears: Wilful Deafness in the Age of Bellicist Realism
- The Planetary Agenda: Overcoming the Severing and the Anthropocentric Matrix
- Bibliographic References

### Abstract

Today, Europe seems to speak only the language of rearmament; it has “war in its head”. Diplomacy has fallen silent, politics is fading, and military urgency now shapes public discourse. This book denounces the “bellicisation” of our society—the infiltration of the logic of war into our collective imagination and mindset—revealing how it has reshaped perceptions, relationships, and political life. Through a socio-cultural analysis, it unpacks the normalisation of war as the default response to global crises, showing how militarised language and narratives distort reality and weaken critical consciousness. Europe, once conceived as a project of peace, is increasingly transforming itself into a fortress—not only in material terms but also in the symbolic realm. In an age marked by growing desensitisation to the threat of conflict and by the celebration of "resilience" as a military virtue, this

book issues a radical appeal: to disarm our language in order to rebuild an anthropology of coexistence. Against the intellectual endorsement of "warrior virtues" as the foundation of social cohesion, it argues for an urgent rethinking of the future grounded in the gentleness of the just, openness to others, and the absolute rejection of war.

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## Preface

He who takes pleasure in tracing an etymology. [...]  
He who prefers others to be right.  
These people, unaware, are saving the world.  
(Jorge Luis Borges, *The Just*, 1981)

Hence if it should be required  
Blood at all costs  
Go offer yours  
If you enjoy it  
(Ivano Fossati, *The Deserter*, 1992)

Until we think we have the monopoly of "good,"  
Until we speak of our civilization as the only civilization,  
Ignoring others, we are not on the right path  
(Tiziano Terzani, *Letters Against War*, 2002)

"I caught the war in my head. It's trapped inside my head". With these words, the controversial and visionary novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1934, p. 3) described the lasting effects of combat, recalling the moment he was severely wounded in the ear as a young cavalryman during the First World War.

Judging by Europe's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israel's campaign in Gaza—which many have described as genocidal—and, more recently, the escalation across the Middle East, the Old Continent seems to have lost the ability to imagine solutions outside military logic. Specifically, Europe has relied almost exclusively on military support to Ukraine, long tolerated in Gaza what it publicly claimed to condemn, and, when confronted with Israeli and U.S. attack on Iran, appeared far more concerned with economic fallout than with upholding international law. At times, European leaders have even adopted a Pontius Pilate stance, washing their hands of this aggression and refusing either to endorse or condemn it.

If Céline described war as an obsession lodged within the individual mind, today one could argue that Europe itself has "caught the war in its head". To borrow a vivid expression from the Neapolitan dialect, our political community now seems to be suffering from a genuine *guerra 'n capa* syndrome<sup>1</sup>—that is, a "war in the head".

This book argues that Europe is undergoing discursive and psychopolitical bellicisation, a process in which war is no longer merely a possible event but the organising horizon of thought. In this framework, "war in the head" does not refer purely to an individual's psychological state but to a

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<sup>1</sup>In the Neapolitan dialect, the expression "*a guerra 'n capa*" (literally, "the war in one's head") denotes a state of profound psychological turmoil characterized by internal conflict, where opposing impulses and contradictory thoughts compete for dominance, leaving the individual unable to reach a stable decision. By extension, the phrase implies an obsessive, compulsive fixation on a specific problem, idea, or goal. To "have a war in one's head" (*tener 'a guerra 'n capa*) thus evokes a mind persistently besieged by intrusive thoughts that absorb attention and generate a lasting state of mental agitation and inner distress.

broader transformation whereby political and institutional life, as well as everyday common sense, are increasingly reorganised around the anticipation and normalisation of conflict.

The obsession with war is also reflected in seemingly marginal symbolic choices, which turn out to be emblematic of the cultural climate we are experiencing. Consider, for example, the statement issued by the President of the Piedmont Region, who, on the eve of Liberation Day in Italy (25 April 2025), paid tribute to the *Alpini* (mountain infantry) who died in Russia in the Second World War, claiming that they sacrificed themselves "for our freedom". To say the least, it is a surprising assertion, as it recasts an aggressive military campaign launched by Mussolini and Hitler as a heroic defense of democratic values. This is precisely what happens when a society have a *guerra 'n capa*. For some time now, the European Union has fallen prey to a fatal intoxication with bellicism. The threat of a Russian attack, real or perceived, now monopolizes public debate and dictates an increasing share of political decisions. Yet, while rushing to firmly condemn Putin, Europe has remained largely passive in the face of the massacres in Gaza. This is evident in the EU's inability to reach the necessary consensus to suspend the EU–Israel Association Agreement (2000), due to vetoes, primarily from Germany and Italy.

But Europe also has war in its head, as it seems to be seeking to revitalize its sluggish economy by shifting investment from civilian infrastructure to military spending and, in particular, by redirecting Cohesion Funds (designed to reduce regional disparities among Member States) towards the arms industry, only then to submit to Trump's dictates and resign itself to financing the US defence industry within the framework of the PURL initiative (Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List), promoted by NATO.

Finally, it has war in its head mainly because it seeks to normalise it, to make it appear as an acceptable option among others. It does so, for example, by promoting, through educational programs, the formation of a culture of belligerence, namely, a mentality that justifies the use of force as a plausible response to current challenges, pushing public opinion and institutions to consider war as a normal part of the current geopolitical order and of the security mechanisms of the Member States. It is no longer merely a matter of a military response, but of a profound transformation of our way of being and thinking. With regard to such policies, which aim to mithridatize us—to make us gradually accustomed to war—it is only painful to see how far we have moved away from the very spirit of UNESCO, and how that spirit has been overturned, as stated in its founding declaration: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

Undoubtedly, we live in a world marked by deep international tensions, some of which we Europeans have, to a certain extent, contributed to creating through self-interest, political shortsightedness, or sheer passivity. Even if we accept that the Russian threat is real and that European anxieties are justified, it remains crucial to scrutinize the ways in which this sense of alarm is internalized and translated into political, cultural, symbolic, and discursive forms. Moreover, another reason why "war in the head" may be said to characterize our present condition is that the obsession with war becomes a fixed idea that dominates public consciousness and leaves little room for alternative concerns. It claims absolute priority and demands exclusive attention, relegating every other issue to the background.

In Neapolitan dialect, *a guerra 'n capa* is also used to describe a state of profound inner discord—a conflict, indeed a war, between opposing impulses, between a thought and its opposite. One might see this contradiction, for instance, in the widespread expectation that Russia was on the verge of military collapse because of its perceived inferiority and then, suddenly, in open defiance of the

principle of non-contradiction, the frantic rush to rearm for fear of an imminent Russian invasion. A proposition cannot be both true and false merely because political convenience requires it.

A comparable cognitive dissonance is evident in Europe's response to Israel's massacre of Palestinian civilians. While European governments profess their commitment to human rights and, in some cases, even declare their support for the recognition of the State of Palestine, they continue supplying Israel with weapons and offer political and legal cover. After all, Israel is doing Europe's "dirty work," as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz candidly acknowledged. Such paradoxes reveal a more fundamental tension, one that is emblematic of the war in the head. The dominant logic of war clashes with the idealized image we cultivate of ourselves and with the very values on which we claim to base our democratic and civic identity.

This condition is a psychopolitical pathology. It is also the tangible symptom of a modernity that has become emotionally "explosive" (Illouz 2024): many of its core institutions are increasingly in tension with one another, generating profound contradictions within individuals themselves. The anxiety, frustration, and collective fear that result are both reflected and amplified at the political level, feeding a vicious cycle that distorts political judgment and social priorities, ultimately transforming political and diplomatic questions into military ones. The paranoid fixation on rearmament stems from a profound tension between two opposing dispositions: on the one hand, an emerging governmentality of war; on the other, Europe's long-standing purported culture of dialogue and peace.

In this sense, *a guerra 'n capa* functions as a kind of *mise en abyme*: an expression so dense with meaning that it produces a conceptual vertigo, confronting us with the possibility that the real war in the head is becoming our own. It reflects back the image of a continent marked by deep tensions, suspended between what it fears, what it claims to defend itself against, and what it is—perhaps without ever having consciously or democratically chosen it—increasingly becoming.

It is precisely on this slippage—silent, inexorable, and continuous, like the classical metaphor of the boiling frog—that this book seeks to open up critical reflection. The object of this book is not to determine whether war or rearmament is ethically justified or strategically effective. Rather, it is to interrogate the forms of subjectivity, political rationality, and governmental practices that are produced when war comes to structure our way of seeing the world.

Against the hegemonic narrative that presents rearmament as inevitable and seeks to confine us within a horizon defined by permanent tension, we recall the seminal work of the pioneer of peace research, Johan Galtung, *There are Alternatives!*. Its central message is a powerful reminder that even in conflicts that appear irredeemably deadlocked, there always remains the possibility—and, we would argue, the necessity—of imagining different paths. This fundamental claim by the Norwegian scholar stands in stark contrast to the governing philosophy of our time, epitomized by Margaret Thatcher's dictum that "there is no alternative." Whether applied to economic rationality or to the emerging rationality of war, the effect is the same: the foreclosure of political imagination in the name of necessity. At the height of the Cold War, Galtung pointed out that conflicts presented as inevitable often masked the geopolitical strategies of the superpowers, which deliberately fostered proxy wars and wars of attrition in order to weaken their rivals. In a remarkably prescient reflection, Galtung (1984) suggested that great powers may have a strategic interest in preventing certain conflicts from being resolved. Rather than confronting one another directly, they can externalize the costs and risks of geopolitical rivalry by sustaining or even fostering conflicts among smaller allied states, thereby transforming them into proxy arenas of confrontation. One may consider the war in Ukraine as an updated version of this "Cold Pawn" strategy. Rather than merely externalizing the costs of geopolitical rivalry by sharing them with European allies, the conflict also

appears to have created opportunities for the United States to derive significant economic and strategic advantages from a prolonged military emergency. Unlike the large-scale military interventions that Washington undertook directly in the previous two decades, which ultimately proved financially burdensome and increasingly unsustainable, this model shifts a substantial share of both economic and political costs onto its allies while preserving many of the strategic benefits. The military challenge posed to Russia—which the heavily indebted United States is now seeking to shift onto Europe’s shoulders—represents, for Washington, a unique opportunity for the re-centralization of capital, economic recovery, and the rebalancing of its balance of payments (Brancaccio, Giammetti and Lucarelli 2022). From this perspective, Europe’s zealous fascination with rearmament inevitably recalls the imprudent attitude of someone who, out of love for the rope with which they are destined to hang themselves, embraces their own destruction. The United States benefits economically from selling the arsenal required to turn Ukraine into an impregnable “steel porcupine” (to use Ursula von der Leyen’s expression). The tangible risk of having war *in our heads* is that we may soon be forced to carry its economic burden *in our stomachs*. The contemptuous way in which Trump feels entitled to treat European leaders—including the self-styled “bridge-builder” Giorgia Meloni—stems not only from his imperial conception of international relations, but also from the submissive posture that Europe repeatedly adopts toward US strategic interests. In this respect, Kant’s warning remains strikingly relevant: "One who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him" (1797).

Our concern is not with the economic and geopolitical background of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, but with the cultural and communicative process through which influential opinion leaders and public intellectuals have progressively weaponized public discourse and, with it, common sense. In our view, this is the defining feature of the ongoing cultural transformation: our own war in the head. We are not talking about war as a concrete armed conflict, nor about its horrors and devastation. Nor do we intend to address the geopolitical question of whether European rearmament might serve as a first embryo of a European political consciousness. On the contrary, we argue that if Europeans are to move towards a genuine and effective political union, this project must be grounded in a set of shared institutions among Member States, such as a common foreign policy, common debt, a unified fiscal framework, and harmonized healthcare and welfare systems. Only on such a foundation could an integrated and interoperable European defence system acquire genuine political meaning. Lacking these common European infrastructures, Europe risks moving directly from a market union to a military union, from welfare to warfare, without ever becoming a true political community.

However, it is not these purely political issues that our book seeks to address. Ours is a mediological and cultural analysis rather than a geopolitical one (see Bennato, Farci and Fiorentino 2023): It focuses on the role of opinion leaders rather than on specific governmental decisions, and on the discourses that shape common sense rather than concrete policies or military programmes. We aim specifically to denounce the rearmament of words and minds rather than that of missiles and drones. In other words, we seek to analyse and criticise what we define as the “discursive weaponisation of society”: a transformation that is actively and persistently pursued in the ways we think and act, so that they come to support, sustain, and legitimate an armed configuration of society culminating in a form of mental warfare. A meaningful example is Mark Rutte’s first statement as NATO Secretary General on 15 January 2025. He argued that although NATO’s military readiness has increased, it remains insufficient to face the threats anticipated over the next four to five years: “To prevent war, we need to prepare for it. It’s time to shift to a wartime mindset, and this means we need to strengthen our defences even more by spending more on defence and

producing more and better defence capabilities”. In Rutte’s view, an urgent shift to a wartime mindset is required—that is, the adoption of a pedagogy of militarisation, supported by authoritative thinkers and organic intellectuals who actively promote and implement it. This provides a compelling illustration of what we call the “bellicisation of society”, a term we use to indicate not merely the militarisation of institutions, but a deeper cultural and cognitive reorientation toward the normalisation and anticipation of war as a structuring horizon of social life. We will return later to the role and responsibility of intellectuals. For now, it is more appropriate to examine the reasons behind the war fever that has come to pervade the Old Continent.

## **Toward a Governmentality of War**

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has marked a turning point in our collective imagination of war. We are witnessing a paradigm shift, a reconfiguration of the regime of veridiction in which rearmament—and, with it, the prospect of war—is presented as something inevitable and inescapable, a horizon to which we must resign ourselves, if not gradually become accustomed. Public discourse is increasingly permeated by this type of narrative, which tends to render war thinkable, normal, and progressively acceptable. One of the clearest expressions of this discursive logic can be found in the words pronounced by the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, during a visit to Kraków on 11 October 2024: "Personally, rather than regret, I feel sadness at seeing immense financial resources devoted to the purchase of weapons instead of being used for social purposes—from healthcare to tackling climate change, from culture to infrastructure. But we are compelled by the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine and by the re-emergence of a military aggression that is astonishing, lying outside both history and rationality, even in light of the reciprocal toll in human lives and the devastation inflicted upon the territory."<sup>2</sup>.

Regardless of the content of the statement and its condemnation of Russia, what is most striking is the rhetorical strategy underpinning the discourse, in which rearmament is framed as a painful necessity imposed by circumstances, irrespective of our will. The statement undoubtedly conveys regret—even sadness—over the sacrifices that rearmament entails. Yet, at the same time, it leaves no room for questioning its necessity, presenting it as the only viable course of action and expressing a firm determination to pursue it. There is a form of discursive dissociation, typical of what we call the "war in the head": being willing without willing it, or, ultimately, acquiescing in what is represented as tragically inescapable. The unspoken premise of this discourse is that, when it comes to the necessity of rearmament, the deliberative space of politics is destined to shrink until it becomes almost imperceptible. From the visionary art of the possible, politics is melancholically transformed into the nihilistic management of the necessary. The sadness expressed by Mattarella does not merely refer to an individual emotional state; rather, it signals a confession of the impotence of contemporary political rationality, portrayed as incapable of influencing the course of international relations. This impotence, in turn, becomes another name for a melancholy politics that renounces any attempt to change the course of events. Rather than an expression of political realism, it appears as a form of resignation to reality as constructed and presented by the dominant discourse. Within this framework, preparation for war is portrayed not as a conscious political choice—one that there is insufficient courage to acknowledge publicly—but as a necessary and unavoidable course of action. In this respect, Fabio Mini’s caustic observation on the myth of necessary war is particularly illuminating: “No duty is more compelling than doing what one already wants to do” (Mini 2026).

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<sup>2</sup><https://askanews.it/2024/10/11/ucraina-mattarella-rammarico-per-risorse-ad-armi-ma-siamo-costretti/>

Yesterday, the litany of TINA (“There Is No Alternative”) accompanied neoliberal austerity policies, creating an external constraint to which politics could only adapt. Today, the same depoliticizing logic seems to reappear in the narrative that legitimizes rearmament and promotes the weaponisation of public space and common sense. To grasp the full scope of this transformation, it is not enough to focus on the level of political choices. Rather, we must move to the level of governmentalities, examining the ways in which the very field of the possible is governed. From this perspective, Michel Foucault's analysis of the articulation of the *foci of experience* that have shaped domains such as madness, illness, criminality, and sexuality proves particularly illuminating. As Foucault explains (2008), every governmental rationality emerges at the intersection of specific *forms of veridiction* (such as political economy, statistics, or medicine), particular *normative matrices of conduct* (the forms of state or institutional power that seek to govern the conduct of populations), and corresponding *modes of subjectivation* (the ways through which subjects constitute themselves). Applying Foucault's method to the contemporary experience of war therefore requires asking which forms of knowledge and regimes of truth render it intelligible, which governmental technologies organize and sustain it, and what kind of subjectivity it tends to produce. The aim is to identify the emerging features of the *homo strategicus*, the central figure of what might be called a new war governmentality, just as Foucault identified the *homo oeconomicus* as the paradigmatic subject of neoliberal governmentality.

In this direction, one can point, by way of example and without any claim to exhaustiveness, to a number of events that may be considered particularly emblematic. The statement by Mattarella mentioned above is especially significant insofar as it amplifies a regime of truth in which rearmament appears as a rational and necessary response to an external threat. In such a framework the grammar of geostrategic security tends to establish itself as the privileged lens through which international reality is interpreted, while alternatives to military strengthening are progressively marginalized as unfeasible, quixotic, or, worse still, irresponsible. This regime of truth not only redefines the ways in which international relations are interpreted, but also contributes to the formation of specific modes of subjectivation. Far from being grounded in a disposition toward violence, the *homo strategicus* is the subject who interprets the world through the lens of geopolitical conflict, evaluates relationships in terms of threats and power relations, and guides his or her conduct according to the imperatives of security, resilience, deterrence, and strategic advantage. If the *homo oeconomicus* is essentially an entrepreneur of the self in a world of generalized competition, the *homo strategicus* understands itself as a sentinel, constantly on guard in a world of risks, threats, and vulnerabilities.

Within this framework, in which the rationality of security is being redefined, the tensions it generates within the normative order become apparent. The Italian Constitution is explicitly founded on the rejection of war as an instrument for the settlement of international disputes. For decades, this constitutional principle helped to structure the discursive horizon within which war was perceived and judged in the Italian public sphere. In recent months, there has been no shortage of attempts to gradually erode the normative force of this horizon. This is not a matter of a single coherent strategy, but rather of a plurality of discursive practices operating on different levels. Alongside proposals to reintroduce compulsory military service or to increase military spending—measures at odds with a culture grounded in the rejection of war—there have also been less conspicuous but, for that very reason, more insidious initiatives aimed at “transplanting war into the minds of adolescents” (Ruffino 2025). This is the case, for example, with the online consultation *War and Conflicts*, promoted by the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescence, which included the following question: “If my country went to war, I would feel responsible and, if necessary, I would

enlist". The question "Would you go to war?", when addressed to an adolescent, does not merely serve to elicit individual opinions. Rather, it constitutes a discursive practice through which the subject is interpellated not simply as an observer of war, but as an individual called upon to recognize themselves in advance as a potential participant in it. The subjectifying effect produced by the question is to associate the idea of war with that of personal responsibility, thereby normalizing the willingness to enlist as a legitimate and socially expected possibility. In other words, a willingness to participate in a conflict in the event of an emergency tends implicitly to be valued as a mark of civic maturity and of commitment to the duties of citizenship.

A mechanism of this kind resonates with a broader discursive tradition that attributes to military institutions an educational and integrative function, presenting compulsory military service as an instrument of character formation, a vehicle for the internalization of discipline, and a means of strengthening national identity. Although these narratives take different forms depending on their historical and political contexts, they share a tendency to construct a normative model of citizenship based on the individual's willingness to internalize a strategic understanding of the world, in which preparedness for threats and the security of the collective are elevated to the status of civic duties. The consultation discussed here constitutes only one manifestation of this broader process of subjectivation. Later in this book, we shall examine other discursive practices through which a subjectivity centred on the figure of the "warrior" is constituted, ranging from narratives that portray the disappearance of the warrior figure as a symptom of civic decline (Scurati 2025) to attacks on those whom Italian public debate has labelled "pseudo-pacifists"<sup>3</sup>, stigmatized as *imbelle* (i.e. "unmanly")<sup>4</sup> or as suffering from an "inert syndrome" (Galli della Loggia 2026).

## Fortress Europe

In the celebrated novel by Dino Buzzati *The Tartar Steppe* (1940) Giovanni Drogo is an officer who spends a large part of his life in a remote military outpost, waiting for the fateful moment when he will finally be called upon to demonstrate his courage and valour in repelling the enemy at the gates. He exhausts his ardour and youthful enthusiasm, along with his most noble qualities and aspirations, as well as his dreams of glory and hopes for a better life, while stationed on a desolate frontier in an anonymous fortress (the "Bastiani Fortress"), on guard and waiting for an enemy that may never come.

This parabola may today offer a symbolic key to understanding the condition of contemporary Europe: a society that, seduced by war, seems to have moved almost overnight from ecological transition to military transition, from a welfare-oriented ideal to a warfare-oriented mentality.

On April 2, 2025, the European Parliament approved by a large majority the annual report on the *Implementation of the Common Security and Defense Policy*, a document largely devoted to identifying perceived enemies at its borders (Russia, China, Iran) and defining the strategies required to confront them. With this decision, the European Union appears to have decisively taken the path toward "Fortress Europe", risking the loss of its original vocation as a "civil power" (Telò 2004) — a space of peace, democracy, and freedom — in order to align itself with an emerging logic that progressively militarizes all dimensions of political and civil life.

Certainly, today's international geopolitical landscape presents unprecedented and complex threats that cannot simply be disregarded. In particular, it reveals the growing consolidation of political

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3 The Italian neologism *pacifinti* blends *pacifisti* ("pacifists") and *finti* ("fake" or "phony"), implying that those who oppose military escalation are merely pretending to be pacifists while in fact supporting the aggressor.

4 Significantly, the Italian word *imbelle* ("cowardly") derives from the Latin *imbellis*, literally "unwarlike". The term thus preserves the trace of a cultural logic in which the absence of a martial disposition is recoded as a moral deficiency.

regimes whose principles and practices are profoundly at odds with the historical ideal of democracy that has taken root and developed in the Old Continent. Nevertheless, the decision to adopt an exclusively defensive posture and a predominantly military approach risks profoundly altering the very identity of the Union, turning its security concerns into a pretext for “weaponising” public opinion and political discourse.

Three statistical indicators, in particular, help explain the structural factors underlying this political and cultural shift. The first concerns the relationship between demography and economic strength. According to available data, with a population of 447 million people, the European Union accounts for more than 5% of the world’s population, while the nominal gross domestic product of its Member States (approximately 19.04 trillion dollars) represents almost one fifth of global GDP (97.9 trillion dollars)<sup>5</sup>.

The second indicator highlights Europe’s growing sense of insecurity in an increasingly multipolar and irreversible changing world order. By the end of 2025, the combined GDP of the five main BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China<sup>6</sup>, and South Africa) is expected to exceed 28.72 trillion dollars, surpassing that of the European Union by more than 50% and further diminishing Europe’s relative global weight. The prospect of becoming a peripheral actor, at odds with its historically central role, fuels fears of losing long-established privileges and strengthens the temptation to retreat into a mindset of permanent defence.

Finally, it is worth recalling that even before the current rearmament policy — which envisages new investments of up to 800 billion euros outside the constraints of the Stability Pact, as well as the achievement of the 5% target for contributions to NATO expenditure — the Union already possessed considerable military capabilities, while also benefiting from the protection provided by the transatlantic alliance. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2022 the combined military expenditure of the five Member States with the highest defence spending (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland) exceeded 180 billion dollars, more than twice Russia’s military expenditure in the same year (approximately 86 billion dollars)<sup>7</sup>. These figures may reveal more than any political discourse the concrete risk that Europe could paradoxically turn itself into a “Fortress Bastiani”.

## **Ourselves as Enemies**

In Buzzati’s novel, a bitter truth gradually emerges through the characters’ awareness: namely, that all that feverish preparation for war amounts to nothing more than “a pretense to give meaning to life”. At moments like this, it suddenly becomes clear that the enemy has already prevailed before any battle has even begun, but above all that we have already lost — and, more painfully, that we have lost ourselves. If what we fear most about the enemy is its ability to transform our democratic world, then that transformation has already begun before a single shot has been fired: not least because we have allowed the enemy to redefine our priorities, reshape our ways of life, and influence the very language through which we understand politics, society, and our shared values. In short, it has affected our mindset.

The present essay seeks to encourage critical reflection on the possibility that we Europeans, much like Lieutenant Drogo, must recognize that the most insidious enemy is, first and foremost, rooted in our own obsession with the enemy itself — an obsession shaped by a colonial imagination and by

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<sup>5</sup>Our elaborations based on [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stati\\_per\\_PIL\\_\(nominale\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stati_per_PIL_(nominale))

<sup>6</sup>Excluding from China Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

<sup>7</sup>[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stati\\_per\\_spesa\\_militare](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stati_per_spesa_militare)

a distorted awareness of ourselves as historically dominant powers. Countries such as Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Italy and, of course, the United Kingdom have all experienced, in different ways and with varying degrees of success, an imperial past. This historical legacy continues to shape contemporary political imaginaries and resurfaces in projects built around the rhetoric of “making America great again”, as well as in analogous visions of Europe and, more broadly, of the so-called collective West. As Giorgia Meloni stated during her visit to the Oval Office of the White House, this narrative finds resonance among those who claim to embody and defend such an ideological framework.

It is from this kind of paranoid nostalgia — often sustained by sovereignist and supremacist movements — that our security fixation emerges, along with the desire to construct our identity as an isolated and homogeneous entity, one determined to preserve its privileges at all costs and to protect itself from any form of contamination by the outside world and by the Other.

The central argument proposed here is that, in the current multipolar geopolitical context, our most insidious enemy is, in fact, ourselves. We become this enemy whenever we absolutize and fetishize Western civilization, transforming it into a kind of untouchable “Fortress Bastiani”; and whenever we exacerbate our differences by claiming a presumed superiority over the so-called Global South and over the “barbarians” portrayed as threatening our borders. For years, these imagined barbarian invaders have been given a specific face. They were — and, to a large extent, still are — primarily identified with migrants. Today, however, they also take the form of armed forces acting under Putin’s command or, perhaps, of Chinese electric vehicles perceived as a new frontier of economic invasion. Against these perceived threats, the response increasingly tends to be the adoption of protectionist measures, the call for closed borders, and the spread of increasingly paranoid and aggressive identity-based narratives.

An analogous argument applies, of course, to Russia as well. It too is shaped by nostalgia for an imperial past, and Putin himself could easily embrace a rhetoric of “making Russia great again”. From this perspective emerges its increasingly assertive anti-Western discourse, largely aimed at the preservation and reinforcement of Russian identity through a logic of cultural and geopolitical self-defence. This approach is clearly expressed in Presidential Decree No. 809 of 9 November 2022, entitled “Fundamental Principles of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values”. The decree identifies “traditional values” as the foundation of Russian society and frames “destructive ideologies” allegedly originating from the United States and other hostile foreign states as a threat to be resisted. It establishes a “State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Values”, to be implemented in areas including education and upbringing, youth policies, culture, science, interethnic and interreligious relations, mass media and communications, and international cooperation.

Putin’s Russia is so deeply invested in its founding myth that it seeks to instil it from the earliest stages of socialization. Yet, much the same can now be said of Europe. The report discussed above calls for an “independent structure” to shield the information sphere from “interference by foreign actors,” while also recommending that schools and universities promote debate on security, defence, and the role of the armed forces.

*Mutatis mutandis*, and for all the obvious differences between an authoritarian regime and a liberal democracy—differences nonetheless called into question by controversial measures such as the €800 billion rearmament plan, pushed through by bypassing the EU’s only directly elected institution—the Russian decree and the European report display a striking structural symmetry. Each presupposes the other and draws legitimacy from the other’s existence. In this sense, they are uncannily similar texts. Both follow the logic of what René Girard (1978) called “mimetic

violence”: each mirrors the other, reproducing the same symbolic machinery from opposite sides. The result is a paranoid symmetry that progressively erodes the distinction between aggressor and aggrieved.

As in Ridley Scott’s celebrated film *The Duellists* (1977), the two implacable opponents condemn themselves to exist only through each other, endlessly sustaining their identities by constructing the other as an enemy. This, I would argue, is what is happening in Europe today. We become mimetic the moment we dress for war. By embracing the logic of rearmament, we begin to think like those we claim to resist. As we await for an enemy who may never come, we risk becoming precisely what we fear most. Like Lieutenant Drogo, we continue to rearm and keep watch at the frontier, while the real battle unfolds within us: between the Europe we claim to be—civil, democratic, open, and liberal—and the Europe we are gradually becoming, or perhaps discovering we have been all along. Perhaps, as in *The Tartar Steppe*, it is already too late to turn back.

This book is written in the conviction that we are creating a psychological climate that is leading us to the edge of the abyss. It is offered in the hope that it may help us draw back before reaching the point of no return.

### **A Missed Opportunity, a Possibility Worth Rediscovering**

On 15 February 2003, demonstrations against the Iraq War called for by then US President George W. Bush took place around the world. That day, millions of people—according to some estimates, as many as 36 million—gathered in some 3,000 cities and public squares. Most of them were concentrated in major European capitals such as Madrid, Paris, London, and Berlin. In Rome alone, around three million protesters are said to have taken part, making it, as far as we know, the largest anti-war mobilisation in history<sup>8</sup>.

The protests reverberated across the globe and gave new momentum to those who believed that Europe could emerge as a major democratic actor—not as a military power, but as a political community grounded in consent, dialogue among peoples, and a vision of politics fundamentally at odds with the logic of war. Several governments, however—including those of the United Kingdom, Poland, Spain, and Italy—chose instead to align themselves with Washington’s march to war. More than twenty years later, it is worth asking what remains of those hopes and of the vision of a Europe committed to peace, human rights, and international law. The demonstrations were remarkable not only for their unprecedented scale. They also prompted a far-reaching public debate among some of Europe’s leading intellectuals, who sought to articulate the political significance of that extraordinary day. On 31 May 2003, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida jointly published an essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Libération* entitled “February 15, or: What Binds Europeans Together” (Habermas 2004). At Habermas’s initiative, a series of companion articles appeared simultaneously in several major European newspapers: Umberto Eco wrote for *la Repubblica*, Gianni Vattimo for *La Stampa*, Fernando Savater for *El País*, Adolf Muschg for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and the American philosopher Richard Rorty for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

What is particularly interesting is the difference between today’s vision of European autonomy from the United States and the way it was conceived in that period. Today, almost as a conditioned reflex, the response to strengthening the European Union’s deterrence capacity is to resort to the massive rearmament of individual Member States: it is treated primarily as a military issue. Yesterday, by contrast, the attempt was to capitalize on the experience of a supranational community such as Europe, which has been shaped by a long history of tragic conflicts among neighboring countries, but which, precisely because of this history, was expected to draw lessons from that memory. This

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8 See [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proteste\\_contro\\_la\\_guerra\\_in\\_Iraq](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proteste_contro_la_guerra_in_Iraq)

memory was to become a resource to be invested in the formation of a common identity and in the construction of a unified foreign policy, one oriented towards dialogue and based on the “recognition of the other in its diversity.”

The violence of Europe’s colonial past was therefore expected to serve as an effective vaccine, capable of protecting European states once and for all from the resurgence of ethnocentrism and from the temptation to pursue imperialistic policies of domination. As Habermas and Derrida argue, Europe, more than any other culture, has had to learn at a high price how differences can be reconciled, conflicts institutionalized, and tensions stabilized (Habermas 2004).

Today, we know how the story has unfolded. Europe has distinguished itself above all for its inability to play a diplomatic role in the conflict that has erupted on its borders. As philosopher Massimo Cacciari (2025) stated, “European politics is absent; the history of mediation that [Europe] had maintained until 20 or 30 years ago has disappeared. It is stuck in this oath to follow Zelensky without ifs and buts. In these years, Europe has created a school of lies. Lies about everything: about the origins of this conflict, about the construction of this universal enemy that is Russia.”

Nevertheless, perhaps it is not too late to rewrite the epilogue of a story marked by lies, misguided choices, and guilty omissions. Perhaps what in 2003 proved to be a missed opportunity can today become a possibility still worth exploring. It is up to us, as Europeans, to choose our destiny: whether to bet on politics or on war, whether to choose the confrontation of arms or the arms of confrontation — the tools of diplomacy and dialogue.

## **The Care of Peace**

To borrow the celebrated words that Italo Calvino puts into the mouth of Marco Polo, the protagonist of *Invisible Cities*, we could say that the inferno of war “is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space” (Calvino 1972, p. 165). The greatest risk is not a future war but the inferno that is already here, which we accept—and indeed almost wish for—by preparing for it as though it were inevitable. Thus, inferno is already here the moment we assume it as our existential horizon, the point around which we construct our identity through a commitment to war and the will to fight. To extricate ourselves from this destiny of the “weaponisation” of life, we would also need to recognize what, within this inferno, is not inferno, and thus enable it to endure and give it space.

Quite apart from the death and destruction it causes, war also has deeply corrosive effects on the symbolic and anthropological levels. Its normalization within culture and civil institutions erases the singularity of living beings, reducing them to mere cogs in a war machine. Our thesis is that it is not only war itself that is evil, but also—and in some respects even more so—the weaponisation of individuals and society. From our perspective, there is only one thing worse than war itself: a society that, perhaps in the name of a misguided political realism, comes to accept war as inevitable, resigns itself to becoming part of it, embraces the path of militarisation, and gradually reshapes its system of values, its hierarchy of priorities, and its physical and cultural infrastructures around the prospect of war.

In this way, war is no longer regarded as a tragic aberration that must be banished, but instead comes to be accepted as a permanent feature of international political relations, one that is perceived as an ever-present possibility: perhaps infrequent, yet always looming in the background. Once war comes to be understood as a natural condition, peace is left with the merely residual and negative role of a temporary absence of war. In this sense peace is transformed into armed peace—or, to adopt the vocabulary of the European institutions, into a condition of "preparedness", that is, a war in a latent and virtual state. Once peace is reduced to nothing more than an interval between one war and the next, we lose sight of the radical socio-anthropological difference between war and peace. What fades is the distinction between a society founded on the principle of conflict among nations and one ordered toward human well-being and coexistence, rather than simply the difference between a period in which weapons are being fired and one in which they are being replenished.

As the philosopher Tommaso Greco (2025, p. 5) argues, peace is "the principle"—or, better, "the Principle". This means that peace should not be understood simply as the absence of war; rather, war should be conceived as a pathological interruption of peace. It also means learning to regard peace "as what must above all be cultivated rather than merely built; as what calls us to the preventive responsibility of caring for it rather than to the subsequent task of repairing its wounds". (Greco 2025, p. 22).

What is needed is a cultural paradigm shift in the way we conceive of pacifism. Too often, pacifist arguments are dismissed as utopian, naïve, and politically irresponsible in the face of an enemy that has attacked or shows no willingness to sit at the negotiating table. Yet once the enemy has attacked, it is already too late, as the possibility of a peaceful solution has been drastically reduced. This means that the political, diplomatic, and cultural conditions necessary to cultivate peace and prevent the escalation of conflict were either never created or failed to function. In this sense, the realist who mocks pacifists paradoxically ends up contributing to the very failure of which they accuse them. By dismissing the patient and often imperceptible work of cultivating peace, their own logic undermines precisely those practices that might have prevented war from breaking out.

### **From Person to Role: War as a Machine of Symbolic Annihilation**

There are many ways of erasing living beings. War destroys them physically; of this there can be no doubt. This fact alone is tragic enough to justify every effort to prevent war, rather than continuing to fuel it in the name of victory. Yet war also erases them symbolically as persons, insofar as it confines them to the social role of warriors, enlisting them as fighters and depriving them of their status as unique beings endowed with an irreducible existential singularity.

To borrow Hannah Arendt's terms, a militarized society ends up sacrificing the singular "who" of individuals to the "what" of the function they are called upon to perform in the mobilization for war. In doing so, it deprives both human action and human speech of their distinctive character, reducing them to mere instruments serving an external end rather than expressions of individuals in their uniqueness. In war – observes Arendt – "men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy [...] and the speech becomes indeed 'mere talk', simple one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing, disclosure comes only from deed itself, and this achievement, like all other achievements, cannot disclose the 'who', the unique and distinct identity of the agent. [...] The monuments to the 'Unknown Soldier' after the World War I bear testimony to the then still existing need for glorification, for finding a 'who', an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The frustration of this wish and

the unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually nobody inspired the erection of the monuments to the 'unknown', to all those whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not from their achievement, but of their human dignity" (1958, p. 180-181).

In other words, to accept war as the permanent and normal horizon of civil life is to resign oneself to a mode of existence marked by a pervasive depersonalization, in which the singularity of each human being dissolves behind the mask of social roles. We believe this is the least visible defeat and, precisely for that reason, perhaps the most pernicious. The greatest danger we face is that a society accustomed to thinking of itself in terms of war gradually ceases to recognize the face of each person—whether friend or enemy—as an irreducible and unique *who*.

This is also the point made by Elias Canetti, for whom war is inseparable from the sociological configuration of the mass, the only form of human association in which individuals overcome the fear of being touched and embrace a condition of personal indistinguishability. More precisely, war always brings into confrontation two opposing masses, "twice intertwined" with one another. Every combatant simultaneously belongs, from the perspective of their own side, to the mass of the living and, from the perspective of the enemy, to the mass of the dead. The need to preserve the cohesion of the mass is one of the principal forces behind the persistence of war. According to Canetti (1960), the fact that wars continue to be fought even after their outcome has long been decided is connected with the deepest impulse of the mass: people would rather die with their eyes open than face defeat and witness the dissolution of their own mass. This has been true since time immemorial: the formation of every military mass presupposes the existence of an enemy. "It is always the enemy who started it. Even if he was not the first to speak out, he was certainly planning it; and if he was not actually planning it, he was thinking of it; and, if he was not thinking of it, he would have thought of it". (Canetti p. 73).

In this sense, Putin appears as the necessary enemy—in fact, the perfect enemy. So perfect, indeed, that if he did not exist, he would have to be invented. He is the aggressor, the one who started the war. Admittedly, the injured party is Ukraine, not the European Union (which, of course, Putin regards as protected by NATO). Yet, at a deeper level, this distinction becomes almost irrelevant. The prevailing narrative assumes that the Russian army is ultimately intent on invading other European countries—perhaps even all of them—and that, even if this is not yet the case, it soon will be. Why wait until such a threat materializes if, by then, Russia might already have become too powerful to contain or repel? This logic of hypothetical escalation illustrates how the military mass tends to sustain itself: the enemy is imagined as such before acting and, by being imagined in this way, comes to justify every form of preventive aggression.

According to Canetti, the mass has its origins in the primordial "pack" (*Meute*): a group defined by action and movement. He distinguishes several types of pack—the "hunting pack", the "war pack", the "lamenting pack", and the "increase pack"—but emphasizes how readily they can be transformed into one another. It is striking that, in Europe's current geopolitical context, the war pack and the multiplying pack appear to converge in what might be called a form of bellic welfare. A telling example is the report presented by Mario Draghi to the European Parliament on 9 September 2024 (Draghi 2024). One of the three strategic priorities identified in the report concerns "increasing security and reducing dependencies". The report marks a significant turning point. Higher public spending is no longer advocated primarily to sustain social protection systems but rather to "substantially increase the aggregation of demand for defence assets".

In this new configuration, the imperatives of war and the dynamics of economic expansion become mutually reinforcing. Society gradually becomes accustomed to living in a permanent state of alert,

in which conflict is normalized as a constant feature of collective life. The result is a progressive depersonalization: as the logic of emergency becomes pervasive, individuals are increasingly perceived less as singular persons than as functions within a collective mobilization.

### **Normalizing War to Govern Instability**

The sociologist William Davies has proposed understanding the present moment through the concept of the weaponisation of everyday life: "weaponisation of everyday things weakens the distinction between war and peace, injecting fear into politics as it does so." (2018). The scope of this phenomenon becomes apparent if we consider, for example, how ordinary means of transport, such as trucks, have been turned into instruments of terrorist attack, or how social media platforms originally designed to foster online friendships are now used for hostile purposes, including sowing discord and interfering in other countries' elections. More broadly, strategies associated with so-called hybrid warfare—such as online trolling, data breaches, cyberattacks, and the dissemination of fake news for propaganda purposes—have become increasingly widespread. Donald Trump's tariff policy can likewise be understood as part of a broader process through which even economic policy is transformed into a weapon. This is a subtle form of violence because it lacks the immediate visibility and destructive force of bombs. Yet it gradually erodes the trust, social cohesion, and sense of security on which civil coexistence depends. Like every form of hybrid warfare, it is difficult to locate, identify, and therefore counter. Violence exercised through the institutions and instruments of civil society produces a pervasive sense of vulnerability and imposes a permanent state of anxiety and alertness.

Faced with the *weaponisation of everyday life*, Europe is now, in turn, witnessing what we might call the *quotidianisation—and subsequent normalization—of war*, that is, the rendering of war as a routine presence in civic life. The current programme of rearmament directed against Russia is a clear expression thereof. Rather than simply increasing military capacity, it seeks to bring the logic of war into everyday life, turning civil society into a space that sustains confrontation with the enemy. This development reflects one of the outcomes of the project of global modernity, in line with Walter Mignolo's critique of coloniality: "Once weapons were fabricated to implement wars; the neoliberal inversion of the rhetoric of modernity consists in fabricating wars to implement and sell weapons" (2018, p. 141). In other words, war no longer simply requires weapons; it increasingly serves to justify their continuous production, circulation, and sale.

In line with this logic, attempts are made to normalize the militarization of life, redefining not only our systemic priorities but also our languages and values in terms of a permanent threat. Indeed, a permanent danger becomes paradoxically reassuring—a structural component of a new normality. The worst harm inherent in any danger lies in its unpredictability—once it becomes predictable, it loses its destabilizing charge. Here, the state of exception becomes the ordinary rule of life, founding a new sense and principle of reality: a different symbolic economy, beyond the material one. The war we prepare for is practiced without being declared—and, ultimately, without ever being fought—at least as long as we can delegate it to another by proxy or maintain it in a standby state without precipitating into the abyss of an actual, full-scale war. Evidently, it is a high-risk strategy, but it is believed to be worth it. War insinuates itself into the ordinary management of power in the form of deterrence. From this point of view, Trump's USA and the European Union seem to play different games, bound to result in a reciprocal misunderstanding: the more Trump pursues the weaponisation of ordinary life through an irrational, unpredictable, and characteristically violent policy—take, for instance, the hostile commercial tariffs—the more

Europe normalises war in order to conserve its apparatus of power by relaunching its military-industrial complex.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's distinction between violence and power, Davies explains that turning the structures of civil life into weapons triggers a dynamic of uncontrolled violence. This not only induces "nervous states", without building anything solid, but tends to undermine the very foundations of power, whose main prerogative is instead to operate by "creating a shared sense of reality and normality" (Davies 2018). In other words, destruction destabilizes and induces a state of nervousness in both individuals and States, yet it cannot replace the legitimacy, consensus, and predictability on which political power must be founded in order to stabilize. "You can do many things with bayonets except sit on them", as the French minister Talleyrand famously remarked to legitimize the political restoration sanctioned at the Congress of Vienna following the era of Napoleonic instability. Similarly, one might be able to do anything with the weaponization of shared experience, but it rarely succeeds in channeling the convulsive impulses that sprout from it to build a truly stable, authoritatively and collectively recognized order. This is why, once the boundaries between war and peace are broken, the weaponization of normal life is countered today by an equivalent and opposite mechanism: the normalization of war. This normalization sustains and strengthens internal governance by invoking—and almost welcoming—the threat of a common external enemy. To administer a power that is progressively losing consensus and legitimacy, and thus tends to entrench itself, it becomes a priority to exploit this nervous state through every available means, even at the cost of placing the State in a permanent setting of war.

We are faced with a profound transformation of our time: war must no longer be an exceptional and distant reality. Instead, a strategy of tension must penetrate deeply into daily life, infiltrating the gestures, media, and languages of the everyday, until it becomes a structural part of our normal social and political experience. It is in this way that an external source of instability is converted into a factor of internal cohesion, used solely for the sake of power.

## **The Traps of Deterrence**

"Deterrence" has once again become a definitive keyword of contemporary political debate. Military deterrence is conventionally expected to eliminate the terror of violence by preventing war. Conversely, we must fear that the primary effect of such strategies is instead to root the terror of war into the very normality of everyday life. In fact, deterrence is not an instrument for countering or preventing conflict; rather, it represents a sort of homage to war itself. It extends the symbolic and psychological reach of warfare without addressing any of the root causes of conflict, allowing them instead to rot and radicalize. The peace we must cultivate cannot and must not coincide with the preparation for a future war; the risk of an "armed peace" is simply too great a luxury to afford.

"It is time to abolish war, to cancel it from human history before war cancels humanity", Pope Francis solemnly warned at the onset of the Russian aggression. "More than a month has passed since the invasion of Ukraine", he remarked during an Angelus address delivered in St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2022, "since the start of this cruel and senseless war, which represents a defeat for all of us. There is a need to repudiate war—a place of death where fathers and mothers bury their children, where men kill their brothers without even seeing them, where the powerful decide and the poor die". Far from repudiating war, the logic of deterrence accommodates it, and even risks legitimizing it. On the other hand, it is easy to see how the war in Ukraine drags on despite the constant risk of a nuclear escalation, demonstrating that the irrationality of war is by no means neutralized by the logic of dissuasion.

If deterrence has ultimately become the continuation of war by other means—thus reversing Clausewitz's famous dictum—it is worth noting that our own public discourse has likewise sought to erase the reality of war while continuing to wage it systematically. War is the ultimate evil,

something that we in the West solemnly pledged to taboo and banish forever in the aftermath of the Second World War. Yet this has by no means prevented us, over the past decades, from resorting to military force whenever we have deemed it necessary to protect our interests. In all these cases, the West assumed the role of what in Italian could be called the *Uccidente*—a play on *Occidente* ("the West") and *uccidere* ("to kill"), suggesting a West that becomes a killer.

Nevertheless, even if we have not actually outlawed war as an event, we have at least, up to now, embraced the diplomatic hypocrisy of avoiding any direct evocation of it in our language, indeed systematically erasing its very name. The wars we ourselves have waged in the recent past, in fact, have never been explicitly called wars: at most, they have been presented as international police operations or as ventures to export democracy in Iraq through the use of "smart" bombs (*ça va sans dire*), or as military interventions in Serbia, naturally of a "humanitarian" kind. It is therefore hardly surprising that our belated imitator Putin has also chosen to baptize his own war with the more innocuous and euphemistic formula of "special military operation".

Today we find ourselves at a historic turning point, judging by the fact that speaking openly of making war is no longer even considered improper. Certainly, people continue to regard war as an evil; yet, at the same time, a policy of rearmament has once again come to be perceived in Europe as a realistic antidote to this evil. War is thus being made acceptable and legitimized, while the justification offered is precisely that it would be pursued only in order to prevent it. However, while it cannot be assumed that a society that rearms constitutes an effective remedy against this evil, it is instead certain that it represents a homeopathic remedy for the evil itself (Starobinski 1989): that is, a strategy that ultimately contributes to making war once again morally conceivable and materially practicable.

Rearming for deterrence purposes not only reinforces the idea that war is somehow inevitable; it also ends up legitimizing it as an instrument for resolving conflicts, thereby denying peace as a value to be actively pursued. Peace is not merely something to be hoped for in the future; above all, it is a set of practices and forms of coexistence that must be built and cultivated day by day, in and from the present. The logic of deterrence, by contrast, consists in assembling, here and now, a material and symbolic apparatus of war, based on the conviction that this will ultimately bring about a transformation of the global political climate which, almost miraculously, will lead everything back to peace.

According to a journalistic report (Rodano 2025) discussing the 2024 report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditure has reached an unprecedented level, testifying to a profound transformation in the contemporary attitude towards war. In particular, the 32 member states of NATO account for 55% of global military spending, while European NATO members alone invest 454 billion dollars (approximately 30% of NATO's total expenditure), compared with Russia's 149 billion dollars in 2024. Particularly striking is the case of Germany, which, with 88.5 billion dollars in military expenditure (a 28% increase compared with the previous year), now ranks fourth worldwide after the United States, China, and Russia itself. In doing so, Germany has broken a symbolic taboo that had kept it, after the Second World War, in a condition of self-imposed military restraint.

These figures show how Europe, even before the additional 800 billion euros proposed by Ursula von der Leyen through a process that bypassed parliamentary approval, now seems to have decided that the only way to face the threat of war posed by Putin is to prepare to fight it. This logic is rooted in a deep psychopolitical mechanism, which can be understood as the triumph of what might be called an "anthropology of envy". War represents the archetype of this mechanism because those who resort to it always claim to do so for a legitimate reason, while attributing aggression and

injustice to their opponents. The same action—arming oneself—thus acquires opposite meanings depending on who performs it: when “we” do it, it is presented as a necessary measure to preserve peace; when “the others” do it, it is interpreted as a sign of hostility and a threat to peace itself (Resta 2002, p. 41).

When the remedy to the evil of war is identified solely with preparing for war itself, one ultimately resigns oneself to the reality of war and accepts its symbolic dominance. In other words, when war is understood as the only means of resisting war, one inevitably falls into its own logic, losing the ability to imagine alternative remedies and suffocating every form of critical thought.

The term “deterrence” is emblematic in this regard. Derived from the Latin verb *de-terere*, it has become increasingly common in the discourse of European political leaders. Through this concept, an oxymoronic idea becomes embedded in common sense: that terror can be removed only by inspiring it in others and thus, in practice, by reproducing and spreading it throughout the world. The opposite of terror is therefore no longer identified with a set of values and practices radically opposed to it, but rather with a mode of thinking that remains obsessively focused on terror itself.

In this sense, deterrence, which according to the intentions of the self-proclaimed “realists” should serve to prevent war, risks becoming indistinguishable from an escalation that ultimately leads toward conflict. In theory, rearmament should serve only to discourage an enemy from attacking us. Yet, if the best defense is a pre-emptive attack, the logic of deterrence may itself culminate in a preventive war. In this way, the rejection of war enshrined in our constitutional principles risks being effectively circumvented and rendered largely meaningless.

"If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". This principle, known in the social sciences as the Thomas theorem, was formulated by William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas in *The Child in America* (1928). Their famous illustration is straightforward. If a civil war ends abruptly but the inhabitants of a remote island remain unaware that hostilities have ceased, they will continue fighting and killing one another. The war continues simply because they believe it does.

Today’s situation is different. We are not living through a world war but through the widespread expectation of one: a war imagined by many, feared by most, and perhaps even desired by a few. Yet the underlying mechanism is the same. The gap between perception and reality can itself become a causal force. If Russia is assumed to pose an existential threat, Western governments respond by increasing military spending and strengthening deterrence. Russia, however, may interpret this very rearmament as evidence that the West is preparing for confrontation. It may then conclude that a preventive strike is the safest course of action. Deterrence, intended to prevent war, thus risks creating precisely the conditions under which war becomes more likely.

The logic is self-reinforcing. Once war is treated as inevitable, political actors begin to behave accordingly, and those very behaviours make war increasingly probable. If Europe rearms out of fear of Russian aggression, the Kremlin may read those measures as preparations for an imminent attack and respond before such an attack can occur. Fear generates action; action confirms fear. The result is a classic security dilemma, a vicious circle in which mutual suspicion steadily escalates.

From this perspective, many of the measures currently promoted by the self-described "coalition of the willing" within Europe in response to the Ukrainian crisis appear more likely to increase than to reduce the risk of direct confrontation with Russia. An increasing reliance on military deterrence does not necessarily defuse the crisis; it may instead intensify the spiral of fear, mistrust, and hostility that drives escalation.

Against this background, the final public message delivered by Pope Francis in his Easter *Urbi et Orbi* blessing of 2025, the day before his death, acquires the force of a political as well as a spiritual

testament: "Nor is peace possible without true disarmament! The requirement that every people provide for its own defence must not turn into a race to rearmament".

Ultimately, *deterrence*—which etymologically derives from the same Latin root (*terrere*, "to frighten") as *terror*—does not eliminate terror. Rather, it normalizes it, embedding it more deeply in everyday political life until it becomes a structural feature of international relations. Just as hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue, deterrence risks becoming the homage that war pays to peace. Instead of preventing conflict, it merely displaces it onto the psychological, symbolic, and existential plane. A strategy ostensibly designed to preserve peace ends up continually invoking, imagining, and preparing for war. In doing so, gradually occupies centre stage, imposing its own priorities and reshaping both our minds and our hearts.

### **The Banalization of War and the New "Spirit" of Europe**

To weaponize life, war must first be made banal. It must cease to appear as an exceptional rupture and instead be reduced to just another "manageable crisis" until it comes to seem ordinary, almost inevitable, even—paradoxically—beneficial. At first glance, there seems to be nothing new about this. There was a time when war could even be celebrated as "the world's only hygiene." What is striking today, however, is that this vast work of psychological and cultural preparation unfolds almost without resistance. It unfolds as though nothing extraordinary were happening, as though rearmament itself were simply another routine policy decision.

This is perhaps the most remarkable feature of the present moment: rearmament advances with a disarming sense of normality. The European Union's recommendation that citizens prepare a seventy-two-hour emergency kit is a telling example. Rather than confronting the reality of war, it helps domesticate it, turning catastrophe into a matter of prudent household management. If three days' worth of essential supplies are enough to weather the emergency before life returns to normal, why should war still inspire horror? What is ultimately at stake, however, is not preparedness but our cultural relationship to mortality.

Above all, nothing must be allowed to awaken what Hegel called "the labour of the negative". War must never erupt into public consciousness in the full force of its destructive reality. Yet within the Western tradition, death is precisely the experience in which the truth of life is tested. Learning to confront mortality is what gives life its depth and dignity; it is what raises the human being beyond mere natural existence and into the life of Spirit.

As Hegel puts it in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself; [...] Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being" (1807, p. 19).

Here again, there seems to be nothing entirely new under the sun. Then as now, the task is to make the death of living bodies anthropologically productive—to put it to work as a means of forging the social body and sustaining the life of Spirit. The underlying moral remains the same: we must learn to face war—that is, the possibility of killing and being killed—if we are to become worthy of Spirit. Yet this is also where the present marks a departure. We are expected to embrace this prospect without drama, without the solemnity or sacred gravity that once surrounded such sacrifice. Instead, we are invited to approach it with the cheerful lightness of good-humoured men and women of spirit. This is precisely the tone adopted by the European Commissioner for Crisis Management, Hadja Lahbib, in the light-hearted video in which she advises citizens not to forget a

deck of playing cards in their emergency backpack—something to pass the time between one bombardment and the next.

After all, this is the bizarre idea now being promoted: that war is merely another crisis and, like any other, can be managed according to the familiar logic of crisis management. It is presented as a foreseeable disruption, an ordinary contingency rather than the decisive event that shatters normality and calls into question the very frameworks through which we make sense of our lives.

Heidegger's being-towards-death, the fundamental attunement of Dasein, is thus recast as a reassuring being-towards-war. Yet whereas being-towards-death was meant to disclose the possibility of an authentic existence by rupturing the complacency of everyday life, being-towards-war serves the opposite purpose. It reinforces the structures of ordinary inauthenticity, shielding the routines of everyday chatter from any genuine encounter with existential doubt.

### **The Weaponisation of Discourse: A Cultural Analysis**

War, in itself, is always a relation between Us and Them whose ultimate product is death. The weaponisation of discourse and the quotidianisation of war, by contrast, are cultural processes that saturate the Us. Their primary concern is the enrolment and conscription of life itself, both relying upon practices of inscription. These processes do not simply co-write our lives; they rewrite them, effecting a general transvaluation of values.

It is no coincidence that the terms *enrolment* and *conscription* are fundamentally tied to writing as a technology. To *enrol* is to assign a *role*—that is, to inscribe a life within a normative script laid down in black and white. Conscription, likewise, is an act of inscription: the inclusion of individuals in a collective register of those deemed fit—and therefore available—for military service. In both cases, writing does not merely record a pre-existing reality; it constitutes and authorises it.

The mediological power of writing lies in its capacity to abstract meaning from the plurality of the senses, imposing a single authoritative meaning at the expense of all other forms of perception and sensibility, which are dismissed as ephemeral, unreliable, or deceptive. This is how the regime of war normalisation operates. By arrogating to itself a monopoly over meaning, it stigmatises and delegitimises every form of dissent. It enforces its imperatives by subordinating every competing priority and silencing every dissonant voice.

Marshall McLuhan invoked the mythic figure of Cadmus—the Phoenician prince and legendary founder of Thebes—to show that writing was never born innocent but was, from the outset, inscribed within a destiny of war and conquest. Cadmus, who introduced the phonetic alphabet to Greece, was also the hero who, according to myth, sowed the teeth of the dragon he had slain at Athena's behest. From those teeth sprang an army. The alphabet, McLuhan argued, is a technology of power at a distance: it “meant power and authority and control of military structures at a distance” (1964, p. 82). Arranged in orderly rows, letters resemble teeth: sharp, linear, and compact, they bite into the world to classify, command, and subdue it. Their “power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history” (p. 83). Writing, as a technique of inscription, is already a machine of organisation and domination. It does not merely *ex-pose* the world; it *dis-poses* of it according to a centralising and totalising logic. It is an instrument of conquest as well as of order and control, and its history coincides with that of the monopolisation of power and the suppression of plurality. Cadmus does not bring Greece an alphabet; he brings it an army. Writing does not give voice to life; it rewrites life as a military formation.

Consider the “general” in its double sense: both military and conceptual. As Pierre Bourdieu, quoting Virginia Woolf, observed, “general ideas are generals' ideas” (2012, p. 213). Every general

vision of society is a view from above: panoptic, encompassing, and ultimately statist. It sacrifices lived experience to the reason of the State, transforming places into maps in which, as Michel de Certeau notes, people recognise only routes (de Certeau 1990).

The general who surveys the battlefield from the safety of the command post possesses precisely such a theoretical vision. Indeed, *theorein* in Greek means to look from a distance, as a spectator rather than an actor. From above, movements become lines, bodies become positions, and lives become objectives. What disappears is the singularity of experience: the cries of the wounded, the smell of corpses, the sweat of fear and exhaustion, the violence of combat, and the fleeting gestures of pity that sometimes survive even among enemies.

What the general sees are positions to be taken; what the combatant endures is mud, rain, and death. Theory itself risks reproducing this abstraction at a distance: an apparent general order purchased at the cost of rendering lived experience invisible. The gaze from above, indispensable to military strategy and governmental reason alike, becomes blind to flesh, indifferent to the singularity of living beings and to the irreducible plurality of human experience.

It is the “view of the State”, to quote James Scott (1998): a gaze designed to render social life more legible and therefore more easily manipulable from a position external to life itself. A gaze that governs the conduct of the living in ways that facilitate the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and the suppression of revolt.

Through this panoptic gaze, theory measures life while simultaneously distancing itself from it. It emancipates itself from the real at the cost of betraying it: what appears ordered on the map is, for those immersed in it, disorder and pain, ambivalence and contradiction. The art of war, like that of government, relies on a scriptural anthropology that reorganises lived bodies into a military corps: a multiplicity of singular lives rendered into a totalised and disciplined corps.

Writing, as Bourdieu reminds us, “is the state instrument par excellence, the instrument of totalization: the first written signs were associated with the keeping of records, accounting records in particular. It is therefore the specific instrument of cognitive accumulation, making possible codification, that is, the cognitive unification that makes possible a centralization and monopolization to the benefit of those who hold the code. The codification established by grammar is also a work of unification inseparable from a work of monopolization” (2012, p. 215). Beyond its function as a means of recording, writing is therefore above all an active instrument of totalising organisation and the suppression of multiplicity.

The epistemology of command, expressed through this logic, rests on a paradox: it claims to know and arbitrate the world without inhabiting it, to speak for all while listening to none. Within the framework of writing as a *dispositif* of power, a radical question imposes itself: how can one withdraw from the totalising logic of command? How can one escape the governmental apparatus that mirrors the generals’ strategy? How can one exit the logics of control of writing that organise existence and orient it toward a will to power?

Contemporary war makes this logic visible with particular clarity: while lives are destroyed in the alleys of Gaza or amid the rubble of Donbas cities, decisions are taken on digital maps and high-resolution screens, far from the sites where flesh is exposed to violence. Writing as an apparatus of distant visibility now operates through remotely guided strikes (with intelligence support based in Germany, as later reported in relation to NATO operations in Ukraine), GPS coordinates, satellite-issued commands, and operational plans for target identification generated by artificial intelligence systems (cf. Taddeo 2024). It is the act of naming a target—and, in naming it, erasing it.

This aseptic apparatus produces both maximum visibility and maximum invisibility: it renders military targets fully visible while simultaneously withdrawing the human suffering they entail from

perception, relegating entire regimes of violence to a dimension that escapes the gaze both of the operating general and of public opinion itself.

A paradigmatic case is the war in Ukraine, commonly dated to 24 February 2022, a dating that itself reveals a selective regime of visibility: it presupposes the erasure of the protracted and already bloody civil conflict that had been unfolding since 2014 in the Donbas. This is what has been suggestively described as “the front of the invisible” by those who, like the documentary filmmaker Sara Reginella (2024), have reported directly from that theatre of war.

Merely rejecting the language of power is not enough; one must deconstruct its entire epistemological architecture. We must interrogate the very conditions that sustain its hegemony—a hegemony anchored in the forced unification of the multiple and the reduction of existence to mere functioning (Benasayag 2018). This demands an uncompromising stance against civilization itself, here understood as the commodification of human life—a system that shackles the living to rigid identities and prescribed social functions.

To resist means to shatter the “theoretical” abstraction that power inflicts upon existence. It means refusing to be “written” and caged by the teleological scripts of History. In its place, we must forge an alternative horizon of meaning—one capable of restoring plurality, relation, and the lived body where power demands only abstraction, discipline, and military corps. Ultimately, this is not a simple withdrawal from a reductionist imperative that converts lives into “human resources” bound to the iron logics of performance. It is an active mutiny: an effort to give voice to an alternative history written through existential openness, through the deep interdependencies that bind us to both human and non-human alterity, and through a relentless sense of justice for the casualties of History.

This struggle must be waged on a twin front. On the one hand, we must contest the centrality of the “general”—that theoretical, abstract gaze that disembodies experience and bends it to the demands of order. On the other, we must urgently foster a mode of human existence that refuses the symbolic and material conscription of bodies into pre-packaged narratives and prescribed social roles. This shift demands a radical critique of a Western imagination still intoxicated by the will to power, and increasingly incapable of rising to the height of the world’s multipolar transformations.

The West—or rather, what remains of it within this depleted European rearguard—still claims moral and cultural supremacy. It clings to the universalist presumption that it can speak for and in place of others, appointing itself the sole custodian of historical reason. Today, however, this apparatus has fatally cracked, exposing its structural limits and naked arrogance. Subjectivities once exiled to the margins of history are now taking centre stage and finding their voice. No longer passive recipients of a hegemonic discourse, they have become the architects of new practices, alliances, and narratives. The weaponisation of the world is the death rattle of a globalization that has glaringly failed in its project of domination and its myth of manufactured inclusivity. These new multipolar orders lay bare the crisis of a West that has long sought to write its superiority over the world. Now, as its imperial architecture crumbles, it desperately insists on “making itself great again”—as sovereignists proclaim on both sides of the Atlantic—succeeding only in making itself look increasingly bitter and pathetic.

Yet, an accurate diagnosis requires a deeper look. The impulse to “make the West great again” is by no means exclusive to sovereignist circles; it surfaces as a veritable Freudian slip even within mainstream progressive commentary. In an article titled “The Values of the West and the Hidden Ambiguities,” Stefano Folli (2025) criticizes Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni for an alleged reticence: while she outwardly supports reclaiming Western greatness, she remains ambiguous about whether “Ukraine will or will not have a place within this West.” The ingrained reflex at work

here conceives of the West as an entity whose "greatness" is measured primarily by its capacity to expand its geopolitical sphere of influence. Consequently, even among those who ideologically oppose sovereignist politics, the relationship between the West and the rest of the world continues to be framed in terms of annexation rather than connection.

The crisis of the West, laid bare by the emergence of a multipolar world, demands an epochal transformation that can no longer be deferred. What is required is not the further extension of the logic of annexation and enlistment, but its displacement by a politics of relation: one grounded not in incorporation but in encounter, not in domination but in reciprocal exposure. This entails renouncing the privilege of command and recovering the capacity to listen—not as a moral gesture but as an epistemological condition for inhabiting a world that exceeds every claim to sovereign knowledge.

Resistance to the weaponisation of existence must therefore begin here: in the refusal of an order written by the few and imposed upon the many; in the refusal to surrender the flesh of the world to the abstract theatre of command. Against the governmental reason that reduces life to administration and mobilisation, what becomes necessary is a politics of embodiment—a politics understood as the containment of the inhuman, as responsibility towards the vulnerability of the living, and as the cultivation of relation rather than conquest, solidarity rather than domination.

Only under these conditions can the ancient continuity linking writing to conquest, epistemology to domination, and theory to command be interrupted. What is ultimately at stake is not simply another political programme but another mode of inhabiting the world: one capable of withdrawing from the grammar of power in order to restore visibility, voice, and dignity to what that grammar necessarily excludes—the marginal, the plural, the contingent, and every form of life that escapes the teleological narratives of civilisation and its self-proclaimed progressive destinies.

If war is the continuation of existing rivalries and antagonisms, peace demands the opposite: a radical discontinuity in our ways of inhabiting the world and relating to one another. Every genuine peace presupposes an act of imagination capable of instituting a new horizon of meaning—one that interrupts the continuity of the established order and opens the possibility of another history.

Georg Simmel grasped this asymmetry with remarkable clarity. Whereas the outbreak of war is often the immanent unfolding of tensions present within social life, peace is never their automatic resolution. As he observed, entry into war "is not marked by a unique sociological situation, but antagonism develops directly from all kinds of material relationships inside of peace, albeit not uniformly in its clearest or strongest form. Quite otherwise though in the reverse: peace does not likewise accumulate on strife; the conclusion of strife is a specific undertaking that belongs neither in the one nor in the other category, just as a bridge is something different from either of the banks that it connects" (Simmel 1908, p. 296).

Peace, then, is not the natural resolution of conflict. If war is the immanent unfolding of an existing order, peace is the instituting rupture through which another order comes into being. Today, more urgently than ever, what is required is precisely a labour of imagination: one that interrupts the seeming inevitability of the present order, opens breaches in its continuity, and builds the bridges through which other forms of life may emerge.

### **The End of a Certain Illusion? Bellicisation and the Myth of Western Civilization**

While conventional narratives maintain that war is waged to safeguard democracy and defend a specific way of life, war normalisation operates in the opposite direction: it subverts the very fabric of daily life and puts democracy itself on trial. If the ostensible moral superiority of the Western

model rests upon the plurality of forms of life it accommodates, this very plurality becomes the primary casualty of the militarisation of public discourse. Long before striking the external adversary, the apparatus of war turns its violence inward, sacrificing the foundational values and ideals in whose name society is called upon to rearm and mobilize.

The imminent risk is a collapse of alterity—a fatal convergence with the very totalitarian impulses we claim to oppose, drawing the Western conscience perilously close to its own historical abyss. The discursive mechanisms deployed to fuel contemporary bellicist propaganda display a striking structural affinity with the strategies historically articulated by one of the leading architects of twentieth-century totalitarianism, Hermann Göring. During an interview with the psychologist Gustave Gilbert in his Nuremberg prison cell on 18 April 1946, Göring laid bare what may be called the universal grammar of state mobilization: “Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship. [...] voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country” (Gilbert 1947, p. 255-256).

Today, this aseptic technology of consent is seamlessly reactivated, transforming complex geopolitical crises into binary moral imperatives that serve to discipline public opinion and foreclose alternative horizons of meaning.

Bellicose mobilization can be understood as an abrupt overturning of our way of being, marking a profound fracture between a “before” and an “after”. At first glance, this process of bellicisation is precisely that, if only because it drives a militarizing transformation of collective existence, shifting its focus from welfare to warfare. By renouncing the repudiation of military conflict as a means of resolving international disputes, this shift seeks to consolidate a war economy, engineer a rearmed society, and cultivate a polemogenic culture that mobilizes the pride associated with sovereign identity, whether national or European.

But at a deeper level, it is worth asking whether war mobilisation might itself be understood as a revelatory event of our civilization—that is, as a phenomenon that brings its underlying structure to light, unveiling its nature while realizing its inner logic. After all, the “enlistment of life” is the defining feature of a human condition governed by a dispositif that puts the diffuse flesh of the world to work by inscribing it within the proprietary logic of individualized, competitive, and socially productive bodies (Esposito 2004). Unless we reflect carefully on the continuity between the overt violence of war and the latent violence constitutive of society itself—and draw the corresponding political conclusions—we risk reducing the *revelatory* moment of war mobilisation to a mere act of *re-veiling*: a gesture that once again draws a veil over the way our lives are organized, concealing it behind the illusory curtain of the wartime exception.

When European apologists of war preparedness invoke Vegetius’ maxim, “If you want peace, prepare for war,” they should be taken at their word, albeit in a sense quite different from the one they intend. They are not, in fact, speaking about military deterrence, as the increasingly threadbare official narrative would have us believe. Rather, they inadvertently reveal that what we call “peace” is itself intrinsically configured as a permanent state of potential war. This is the very peace evoked by the famous Latin aphorism. It is in precisely this sense, we argue, that one should understand the “end of illusions” proclaimed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in

justifying Europe's sweeping rearmament following the prospect of American disengagement under the Trump administration.

The illusion whose end von der Leyen proclaims is not primarily the belief that we could indefinitely benefit from the defensive shield of the American protectorate. It is, rather, a disillusionment that is more revealing and existential in nature. Not in the sense that our survival is at stake, but in the sense that it reveals, to recall the poet Ugo Foscolo, of what tears and blood our socially and politically organized existence is fashioned. The assertion that our peace is founded on force and violence marks the end of the illusion of the moral superiority of our civilization and our democracy over other forms of political order—that is, the myth of Western civilization as a uniquely peaceful and normatively superior order.

This illusion undoubtedly stems from an unjustified sense of superiority. Having experienced domestically the so-called "government of the best," it is not surprising that we have also come to see ourselves as part of the "continent of the best," and to claim this status with resounding arrogance. Racism is universally condemned, except, evidently, when it is practiced by us "good people" who, by exporting democracy elsewhere, increasingly give the impression of having exhausted it at home.

We believed we were different from countries that pursue power politics; instead, we find ourselves only more hypocritical and ridiculously over-ambitious. In this sense, Trump—whose attack on Iran tore away the hypocritical fig leaf that had long obscured the moral distinction between aggressors and the attacked—performs a precious "apocalyptic" function: first in its contemporary meaning, by disrupting a consolidated balance, but also in its etymological sense, by revealing the very nature of the order it brings into crisis. Apparently, through our pursuit of rearmament, we have resolved to transform Europe into a global military power, mobilizing to display this status in the public square with brandished pride. Evidently, the power of our will finds its most intense expression precisely when it channels our will to power.

We have decided that our priority as Europeans is to constitute ourselves as an armed fortress. We are no longer a subject embodying diversity—one that seeks to deactivate rival wills to power through a careful balance of diplomacy, politics, law, economic cooperation, trade, culture, art, science, free thought, and religious tolerance. Instead, we have become the mimetic rival of those very "evil" entities from whose expansionism we—the self-proclaimed "good" and "well-intentioned" (by our own definition)—seek to protect the fading treasure of our presumed diversity. Perhaps the moment has truly come to acknowledge that the end of illusions implicates us directly, calling into question our self-proclaimed "magnificent and progressive destinies." It relentlessly exposes the gap between what we have always claimed to be and what we are now revealing ourselves to be—but which, in truth, we have been all along. This is why interpreting the European rearmament plan as a sharp break with the past risks being misleading. Such a reading ultimately functions as a consolatory veil rather than a genuine revelation of our condition as formerly central—and, in many cases, former colonial—powers struggling to preserve long-standing privileges and entrenched forms of domination in a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar and ever less willing to recognize them.

An insightful account of the continuity between the ordinary fabric of contemporary social life and the current drive toward rearmament is offered by the sociologist Marco Revelli in his article "War! The Betrayal of the Clerics!" (2025). Revelli traces this development to the process of radical individualization that has shaped contemporary society for decades. Liberal thought has traditionally regarded market competition as an alternative to military conflict—encapsulated in the maxim often attributed to the economist Claude Frédéric Bastiat: "Where goods do not cross

frontiers, armies will". Revelli challenges this liberal assumption. Rather than constituting an alternative to war, neoliberal competition progressively internalizes and diffuses the logic of war throughout the social body. The ongoing bellicisation of society is therefore not an accidental by-product of neoliberalism but one of its most coherent outcomes. Its contemporary advocates—the new "clerics"—by endorsing military rearmament, ultimately "betray both themselves and the rest of us."

According to Revelli, the first casualty of this betrayal is the education system, which has been progressively reshaped over recent decades according to the hegemonic logic of competitive individualism and financial markets (cf. Laval, Vergne, Clément, and Dreux 2011). Schools thus cease to be a place intended, in the Enlightenment and humanist imagination, "to cultivate relationships grounded in shared learning and the power of commonality", becoming instead "workshops for producing competitive, atomized, and ultimately predatory individuals". Within this environment, children are "(mis)educated from an early age to regard others as competitors against whom they must constantly measure themselves according to a winner-take-all logic, driven by the anxiety of joining the ranks of the winners and the fear of falling among the losers". In such a zero-sum race, success depends not only on accumulating "educational credits" as though they were stock options traded on an imaginary exchange, but also on displaying branded clothes to humiliate classmates who cannot afford them, cultivating an aggressive image, and learning to exploit others' vulnerabilities while concealing one's own—to bully or be bullied (Revelli 2025). It is within this regime of socialization, permeated by symbolic and cultural violence, that the bellicisation of society emerges—not as an aberration but as the logical outcome of an educational and social order grounded in competition, atomization, and the imperative of performance.

Any critique of bellicisation must begin by exposing the intrinsic relationship between war and administrative rationality. This nexus is reflected even in the semantic proximity of the German terms *Gewalt* (violence, coercive power) and *Verwaltung* (administration), both belonging to a semantic field centred on the exercise of authority: in the former, authority manifests itself through coercion and violence; in the latter, through the ostensibly rational procedures of bureaucratic administration. Modern systems of management—including those that increasingly shape educational institutions—remain deeply indebted to military and organizational doctrines developed under National Socialism, as the French historian Johann Chapoutot has compellingly shown (2020). What Chapoutot reconstructs is precisely the migration of military forms of command into the ordinary techniques of organizational governance.

A pivotal figure in this genealogy is Reinhard Höhn, who was first a jurist and SS general before founding, in 1956, the *Akademie für Führungskräfte der Wirtschaft* in Bad Harzburg. By the time of Höhn's death in 2000, the institution had trained an estimated 600,000 managers, becoming one of the most influential management schools in postwar Germany. According to Chapoutot, the common principle underlying both military command and Höhn's theory of management is the delegation of operational responsibility within a framework designed to maximize flexibility and initiative. Yet this responsibility is confined exclusively to the execution of assigned tasks. Managers, like military officers, are granted autonomy only in selecting the means by which objectives are to be achieved, never in questioning those objectives or participating in their formulation. As Chapoutot observes, "the officer in the field, like the manager, in no way participates in the definition of the objective, because the latter has been assigned to him within the limits of a task to be accomplished. It is not for him to decide which hill to take or which destination to reach, or to repudiate that objective as completely absurd. His sole freedom is to find, by himself, autonomously, the way to achieve the objective. He is, therefore, free to obey" (2020).

In this context, it becomes evident that responsibility does not correspond to genuine autonomy but instead gives rise to a subtle, concealed form of control. The principle of autonomy, while formally affirmed, is emptied of any real decision-making power and becomes an instrument of indirect governance. This is a management-by-objectives model that proves particularly congenial to neoliberal forms of subjectivation and to the post-Fordist spirit of new capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999), insofar as it mobilizes the active involvement of workers in the fate of the organization. At the same time, however, it takes on the paradoxical and exhausting form of a “double bind”: autonomy is demanded, but only in order to implement predetermined directives.

In this sense, the apparent injunction to autonomy—central to the neoliberal narrative—becomes, like the paradoxical command “be spontaneous,” a façade that conceals a regime of continuous pressure and control, where management itself borders on a form of psychological violence.

Like management-by-objectives systems, standardized performance measurement systems—now widespread, for example, in schools and universities—were originally developed in military contexts. Robert McNamara experimented with such techniques in managing military operations when, as U.S. Secretary of Defense, he oversaw the Vietnam War. In particular, he promoted the “body count” as a key indicator for assessing American progress in combat against enemy forces.

As is often the case in organizational settings, any indicator used to measure performance tends to lose its informational value once it becomes a target: actors begin to optimize their behavior in relation to the indicator itself, rather than the underlying objective it is meant to capture. The same dynamic unfolded in the Vietnam War, where the various branches of the armed forces sought to maximize the measurable “product”: the air force increased the number of bombings; the artillery increased the number of shells fired; the infantry refined the body count, adapting their conduct to the statistical indices elaborated by McNamara and his analysts at the Pentagon (Muller 2018).

### **War of Words Against Outsiders**

Perhaps this is too cynical a view, but public discourse often conveys the impression that the European Union requires the presence of an external aggressor in order to consolidate the ideological glue that holds it together—to the point that, were such a war not to exist, one might suspect it would have to be invented. This is because moments of wartime crisis call for the bellicisation of language and public discourse, a strategy that proves remarkably effective in silencing dissenting voices and manufacturing emotional, cultural, and political cohesion. Indeed, the threat of war constitutes an archetypal state of emergency, easily exploited to mobilize public opinion by forcing it into political conformity behind the incumbent political leadership, thereby transforming political opponents into internal outsiders whose dissent is treated as a security threat.

This stabilizing function is performed primarily by intellectuals, journalists, and opinion leaders—who act less as autonomous individuals than as agents of a broader discursive apparatus (*dispositif*) that determines who is entitled to speak and which positions are regarded as legitimate. The symbolic bellicisation of the public sphere operates in two complementary ways. On the one hand, it seeks to reawaken a sense of civilizational superiority through appeals to the supposedly glorious founding values of a lost past—hence the reactionary rhetoric of “making our past identity great again.” On the other hand, it systematically delegitimizes anyone expressing a dissenting view, going so far as to level the odious accusation of collusion with the enemy. In this climate, dissent is recast as complicity or ideological proximity to Putin—as epitomized by the public blacklists of the so-called *Putinversteher* (those accused of excessive sympathy toward Russia’s motives), a category that has left a significant mark on Italian public debate.

If truth is the first victim of war, the artificial construction of unanimity becomes the main product of the bellicisation of public discourse. Representing public opinion as a compact, homogeneous entity is a discursive operation that obscures the fact that, even in the face of an event that threatens the entire community, individuals are not situated in the same material and symbolic conditions. The rhetoric of uniformity does not merely homogenize ideas and positions; above all, it erases lived differences and subjective ways of interpreting events. Yet the same event does not carry the same meaning for everyone, nor does it entail the same stakes. The perception of an event, the value attributed to it, and the emotional and symbolic investment it elicits depend on the specific position each subject occupies within a given social field.

This heterogeneity of social experience is not merely psychological but reflects the unequal positions individuals occupy within social fields. The emeritus president of the Italian Constitutional Court, Gustavo Zagrebelsky (2025), offers a concrete example of how social position shapes the perception of events. In an interview, he noted that war is, by its very nature, never democratic but always “oligarchic,” since it is “decided by the few who benefit from it, at the expense of the many who fight it and risk their lives.” This argument can be illuminated by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*, defined as the tacit adherence to the *doxa* of a field—that is, “the unquestioned condition of every discussion” (1997). For Bourdieu, individuals pre-reflectively accept the stakes of the “game” played within the various fields in which they are involved, together with the corresponding regimes of truth. *Illusio* determines what is perceived as important, desirable, and worthy of attention. Consequently, what appears as a threat, an urgency, or a value for some may appear secondary or even irrelevant for others.

War is one of those collective phenomena that require immediate and collective adherence to a system of material and symbolic interests through which war itself is legitimized. In demanding a comparable degree of involvement from individuals, war necessarily disregards the plurality of subjective dispositions that shape social experience, as well as the objective positions from which those dispositions emerge. In this sense, the rhetoric of bellicisation ultimately reinforces the intrinsically oligarchic logic of insiders—those who stand to benefit from a field whose stakes are defined in relation to war. Such rhetoric reshapes the public agenda. It suppresses differences, forecloses dissenting voices, and ultimately misrecognizes the heterogeneous reality of social fields. Thus, in the name of unity, the hegemony of insiders is consecrated, and a logic of war is imposed that, before confronting external enemies, seeks to neutralize internal dissent and marginalize outsiders.

### **The University of Peace and the Art of Human Relations: The Lesson of Virginia Woolf**

Not everyone perceives the world from the same standpoint, nor does everyone share the same *illusio*: some inhabit social life as insiders, while others experience it from the position of outsiders. It is precisely from this awareness that Virginia Woolf develops her reflections. Even as Britain faced the prospect of war, she refused to collapse diverse social positions into a single national front. Instead, she advanced a radical critique that calls into question educational institutions—and the university in particular—which, she argued, should be reimagined not as a meritocratic arena but as a space of symbolic disarmament, where the art of cooperation can be cultivated.

In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf imagines receiving a letter from a middle-aged lawyer inviting her to support an initiative against war. While sharing his pacifist commitment, she insists that, as a woman, she cannot address the issue from the same standpoint as her interlocutor, because she does not occupy the same position within the social field. More fundamentally, she cannot perceive the world as he does, since she does not share the same *illusio*—the same practical investment in its

values, hierarchies, and stakes. As Woolf puts it, "though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes." (p. 16). Viewed from the standpoint of an outsider, the patriarchal world of work, war, and public life loses its apparent naturalness. It appears instead as something strange, alien, and ultimately hostile. It is for this reason that Woolf maintains that the struggle against war must begin with a radical rethinking of the university, in order to "educate the young to hate war" (p. 23). In her critical perspective, British universities function as institutions that celebrate competition and the pursuit of success, thereby encouraging individual ambition at the expense of cooperation. It is precisely this symbolic order that, she argues, nurtures the exhibitionist culture and politics of force underpinning international relations and, ultimately, war. To Woolf, the affinity is unmistakable: the ostentatious majesty of academic robes trimmed with ermine mirrors the insignia, decorations, and medals displayed on the uniforms of high-ranking military officers: "for educated men to emphasize their superiority over other people, either in birth or intellect, by dressing differently, or by adding titles before, or letters after their names are acts that rouse competition and jealousy—emotions which, as we need scarcely draw upon biography to prove, nor ask psychology to show, have their share in encouraging a disposition towards war." (p. 21). The university she has in mind must instead foster a "kind of society" and "kind of people that will help to prevent war" (p. 32). For this reason, higher education must not teach "the arts of dominating other people", but "the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds". Its aim, instead, "should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine" (p. 33).

In other words, the university must not be conceived, as it still largely is today, as a dehumanizing "sorting machine" (Sandel 2020), but as an institution dedicated to cultivating a free and inclusive society: one that is not "parcelled out into the miserable distinctions of rich and poor, of clever and stupid", but in which "all the different degrees and kinds of mind, body and soul merit [can] co-operated", where "learning is sought for itself", and from which, finally, "the old poisoned vanities and parades which breed competition and jealousy" are eradicated once and for all (p. 33). Culture and science are, and must remain, "disinterested", because the gravest adultery is that of the brain: "to write for the sake of money", out of personal ambition, or in pursuit of success and recognition. "Culture mixed with advertisement and publicity are also adulterated forms of culture". Hence, one must abstain from all "the forms of brain prostitution which are so insidiously suggested by the pimps and panders of the brain-selling trade", and refuse all "those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified" (p. 87).

For Woolf, the nexus between physical war and the symbolic war waged within educational institutions is clearly structural. Indeed, she identifies a subterranean connection between the images of death and destruction emerging from the theatres of war (tragically alike across different contexts), on the one hand, and the "prostituted culture" and "intellectual slavery" (*ibid.*) produced by education and research systems governed by the logic of competition and meritocracy, on the other. Ultimately, peace is not an abstract ideal but a commitment that, if it is not to remain merely aspirational, must be constantly practised in the most ordinary and seemingly insignificant situations of everyday life. Achieving it therefore requires a radical transformation of the civil institutions that make war possible, beginning with the university.

The same principle must be extended to the liberal professions. They, too, must be subjected to a thorough anthropological rethinking of their ethical foundations in order to extirpate the culture of war from everyday life. Without doubt, the deepest reform is an inner one: it concerns "mental chastity" (p. 77), that is, the capacity for autonomous rather than servile thought. First of all, one must banish "all methods of advertising merit" and "hold that ridicule, obscurity and censure are preferable, for psychological reasons, to fame and praise" (p. 75). Above all, however, it is

necessary to free oneself from all the "unreal loyalties" generated by pride—for example, "pride of nationality", as well as "religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride" (*ibid.*). Moreover, "if it was wrong to sell the body for money it is much more wrong to sell the mind for money" (p. 77). Preserving the autonomy of one's mind and will is therefore an indispensable condition for "abolish[ing] the inhumanity, the beastliness, the horror, the folly of war" (*ibid.*).

### **The University of War**

What role can—and must—the university, as the universalistic institution *par excellence*, play in an age marked by the division of humanity into armed blocs and the general militarization of the world? In a context in which everything is increasingly militarized and polarized, the university risks becoming yet another instrument of propaganda or, worse still, of institutionalized hypocrisy. This dilemma has become particularly evident in the heated controversies surrounding proposals to boycott scientific collaborations with academic institutions in countries regarded as "enemies", such as Russia, or accused of committing war crimes, such as Israel. On the one hand, it has been argued that suspending partnerships with universities in those countries would send a clear, if only symbolic, message of condemnation of political choices that fundamentally contradict the university's transnational and peaceful mission. On the other hand, imposing sanctions and academic boycotts on the scientific communities of those countries would risk "dragging into the logic of war (binary, simplified and structured around absolute friend/enemy oppositions) even one of the few institutions that can help us get out of this black hole, which devours everything", as Tomaso Montanari (2025, p. 89) has argued.

The issue, however, is too important to be dismissed as a merely contingent controversy. It compels us to reflect on the very nature of the university. More specifically, it requires us to question the very idea of academic universalism and the epistemic model it embodies and reproduces. Is the university truly a neutral institution, committed to the universality of knowledge? Or is it, on the contrary, the bearer of a long history of epistemic exclusion and cultural homogenization, rooted in violence and oppression? After all, "neutrality is an ideological device in a society divided between oppressors and oppressed. In such a society, to remain neutral amounts to being on the side of the powerful and the oppressors" (Santos 2018, p. 44).

Consider the neo-institutionalist perspective advanced by David Frank and John Meyer (2020), who argue that the university is the ultimate universalistic institution of contemporary globalization. Following the Cold War, the university emerged as a common cultural platform that translates local knowledge into universal codes, creating shared standards and cognitive legitimacy across national boundaries. In other words, higher education functions as a powerful driver of global isomorphism, mirroring the historical role of the Church. For this reason, Frank and Meyer view it as the "sacred canopy" of contemporary life—the only global institution capable of lending meaning and coherence to social experience by rationalizing, standardizing, and accrediting knowledge. This symbolic function also shapes subjectivity: university degrees transform nation-state citizens into "strategic actors" endowed with a "divine creative essence" to operate within the rationalized knowledge society. Ultimately, they argue, the university stands as the only truly functional global institution suited to uphold universalistic, rational, and meritocratic values.

But it is precisely here that a fracture emerges. The universalism being celebrated is less a dialogue than a monologue. Its standards are not, nor could they ever be, neutral, but historically situated and charged with Western values. University reforms inspired by New Public Management - like the Bologna Process - have only consolidated this colonial logic, transforming the university into an entrepreneurial actor, oriented toward producing human capital guided by the imperatives of

efficiency, competition, and standardization. International rankings, quality assurance systems, bibliometrics, the English language as the unique code of science, and curricular standardization are all instruments of this hegemony, which reinforces new inequalities disguised as "merit". Take the so-called Dublin Descriptors, which have become the standard framework for programme design and the certification of competencies in terms of expected learning outcomes and comparability of academic credentials. Among these descriptors, the one concerning "autonomy of judgment" is particularly revealing—indeed, almost grotesque. How can one standardize a faculty such as autonomy, which by definition resists standardization? More fundamentally, how is it possible to make critical capacity compatible with a system of control, or certify freedom according to measurable criteria if not in the most dystopian dreams of an unchecked bureaucracy? Mechanisms such as these reveal the deep tension between the professed ideal of open and critical knowledge and the operating logic of a system geared toward normalization, measurement, and hierarchy. These tools are never entirely neutral. Rather, they help sustain a legitimizing narrative that, far from expressing genuine universality, serves to obscure the colonial matrix of academic knowledge. In fact, their claim to universality is nothing but the result of a long process of epistemic domination. As decolonial thinkers like Raewyn Connell (2019), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), and Walter D. Mignolo (2021) have long argued, the universalization of knowledge promoted by Western universities is not the product of a spontaneous convergence, but the outcome of a long epistemic war. It originated in European colonial expansion. This gave rise to a global division of epistemic labor: imperial centres were assigned the task of producing theory and interpretation through extractivist knowledge practices, while the peripheries supplied data, materials, and observational reports. This is what Santos calls epistemicide, that is, "the destruction of an immense variety of ways of knowing that prevail [...] in the colonial societies" (2018, p. 8), which occurs through the systematic erasure of indigenous cosmologies and related situated knowledges, rendered invisible or subordinated in the name of modern rationality and "Northern epistemologies".

It follows that the logics governing the contemporary university are not confined to academia. They form part of a broader global order that shapes both regimes of knowledge and practices of domination and warfare. This process of epistemicide has profound political and material consequences. It provides the symbolic and cognitive foundations of a world order that presents itself as rational yet does not hesitate to impose itself through force. The universalistic university, which presents itself as both neutral and global, is an integral part of this order. It supplies the conceptual vocabulary through which the West legitimizes its "humanitarian interventions"; it trains global elites to interpret the world through the imperatives of efficiency, instrumental rationality, and linear progress; it develops technologies that serve the military-industrial apparatus and helps define who counts as "civilized" and who as "barbaric". Academic universalism, then, is not merely incapable of guaranteeing peace. It also provides one of the symbolic conditions that make the ongoing bellicisation of the world possible. Long before wars are fought with weapons, they are waged through concepts, metrics, and epistemic frameworks that organize the world according to a particular geography of power.

### **The New Militarist School**

Military rearmament cannot occur without a corresponding cultural mobilization and consistent indoctrination, both of which align with the growing bellicisation of public discourse. Preparing for war requires the warrior spirit to deeply penetrate every layer of the social and cultural fabric. Ranks must be closed to forge an ideological cohesion that shuts out critical thinking and dissent,

both of which are viewed as obstacles to a unified narrative against the enemy. As with any effective propaganda, war must be fought on the domestic cultural front long before the actual battlefield is reached.

In this context, it is no surprise that on 2 April 2025, the European Parliament overwhelmingly approved the 2024 annual report on the "Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy"<sup>9</sup>. Among various measures, the Parliament committed to establishing a "European Democracy Shield" (art. 127) and urged Member States and the Commission to consider creating a "well-resourced and independent structure tasked with identifying, analysing and documenting FIMI [Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference] threats against the EU as a whole" (art. 143). This body would also be tasked with tracking and removing online content deemed misleading. This proposal seems to echo the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee established in the United States during the Cold War, which orchestrated the "witch hunts" that targeted artists, intellectuals, and public officials suspected of collaborating with the enemy.

Similarly, the body proposed by the European Parliament aims to exercise control over public information, effectively cleansing democratic debate of any divergent communication. This process of cultural bellicisation is not only about the information control; it extends directly into education, affecting schools and the training of future generations (see Osservatorio contro la militarizzazione delle scuole e delle università 2025). This unsettling scenario foreshadows a new ideological reconfiguration of education: if the last thirty years witnessed the construction of the "new capitalist school" (Laval, Vergne, Clément, and Dreux 2011), the prerequisites now appear to be in place for the emergence of a true "new militarist school."

In the same report approved by the European Parliament, Member States are also invited "to develop awareness-raising and educational programmes, especially for the young, aimed at improving knowledge and facilitating debates on security, defence and the importance of the armed forces and at strengthening the resilience and preparedness of societies to face security challenges" (art. 164). This approach also entails cultivating the "psychological resilience of individuals and household preparedness" (art. 165)—a whole-of-society strategy requiring active commitment from EU institutions, Member States, civil society, and individual citizens. Specifically, the report calls for "developing train-the-trainers programmes and cooperation between defence institutions and universities of EU Member States, such as military courses, exercises and role playing training activities for civilian students" (art. 167).

Poland has already moved in this direction, introducing the "Education with the Army" (*Edukacja z wojskiem*) programme in schools, which combines theoretical knowledge with practical training, including shooting drills, simulated conflicts, and military discipline. In spring 2024, the initiative involved approximately 90,000 students across more than 6,000 schools (Caridi 2025), and it is expected to expand in the coming years to embed a culture of defence and military security within society. This serves as an unsettling model of what education could look like in the future across Europe. Meanwhile, even Italy is making significant efforts to legitimize military values through initiatives where armed forces representatives meet students to raise awareness about defence needs. For example, a school in the province of Vicenza spent over 15,000 euros of EU funds—specifically tied to "reduction of territorial gaps"—on a course held by "military survival" experts at a shooting range. Also worth mentioning is the reaction to one of these initiatives by a group of parents of students at the "Lucio Piccolo" State High School in Capo d'Orlando (Messina), who sent the following letter to the school principal: "it is inappropriate for the school—a place where

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9 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0058\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0058_EN.html)

consciences are shaped, values are cultivated, and the future is built—to be transformed into fertile ground for the spread of militaristic ideologies and the orientation of youth toward war. In the current socio-political climate, we are witnessing the normalization of war education within an increasingly worrying atmosphere. [...] The role of the school is to teach youth the art of debate, dialogue, and mutual understanding. It should be an environment that promotes a culture of peace, diplomacy, and respect for differences. Any attempt to introduce activities with a militaristic undertone risks undermining these fundamental objectives. [...] We cannot allow schools and students to become a recruitment ground or a vehicle of consensus for military activities. Article 11 of the Italian Constitution clearly states that Italy repudiates war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other peoples and as a means for settling international disputes. This is not an empty phrase, but a fundamental principle that must guide every educational choice. Every student has the right to an education that shapes them into a conscious, critical citizen capable of contributing to a better world—not into a future soldier for conflicts that enrich the few and destroy the lives of many. The school is the beating heart of society and must remain a space of peace" (cited in Turato 2025).

### **Resilience: from Economic Virtue to Martial Virtue**

The European Parliament's resolution marks a profound shift in the framing of warfare. Rather than being treated as an exceptional disruption to be resolved as quickly as possible, war is repositioned as a state of perpetual mobilization. As the guiding principle of European policy, this approach accelerates militarization and normalizes a constant war footing.

Equally revealing is the report's appeal to "resilience," one of the defining concepts of neoliberal rationality. What once referred to an individual's capacity to cope with traumatic or exceptional circumstances has gradually become a discursive tool for legitimizing passive adaptation to increasingly harsh conditions. In this sense, resilience no longer serves simply as a psychological virtue; it functions as a way of making the condition of war appear normal and unavoidable.

It is no surprise, then, that the European Parliament's report redefines resilience, shifting it from an economic virtue to a martial one. Decades of neoliberal subjectivation have trained individuals, both psychologically and culturally, to accept the hardships of economic competition as inevitable. Rather than challenging structural causes, citizens are urged to endure them through resilience. Today, this exact logic is being extended to the permanent bellicisation of life.

"Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul": with these words, destined to become one of her most famous programmatic declarations, Margaret Thatcher concluded an interview with the *Sunday Times* on 1 May 1981<sup>10</sup>. More than forty years later, we can clearly observe the effects of the anthropological metamorphosis produced by that very agenda. Where we once committed ourselves to transforming the world through collective action, today we resign ourselves to the idea that it is the world that has transformed us, forcing us to adapt individually.

From this defeat, we have learned to make a virtue—the kind that allows us to make the best of a bad job. The European Parliament's emphasis on resilience is based on an idea, with vague post-democratic and apolitical overtones, that the world is already a given, leaving no room for transformation, only adaptation. This mental *habitus*, in which every hardship is internalized and faced solely as a personal challenge, has progressively eroded our capacity to think politically. Consequently, we tend to accept choices of monumental importance—such as increasing military expenditure or defining an external enemy—as unchangeable facts of life to be managed

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10 <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>

psychologically, rather than political decisions to be debated publicly and challenged at their very roots.

To the extent that Russia is defined unequivocally as “the enemy,” we are left with no choice but to internalize this representation and react accordingly. We are thus induced to view rearmament and the risk of destruction as an inevitable destiny, rather than as a political construction to be questioned. Ultimately, as Thatcher herself taught us, even when it comes to war, “there is no alternative”. Here lies the hard core of war governmentality. This is precisely the aim of the bellicisation of public discourse pursued by the European Parliament: to transform war into a fact to be metabolized at a psychological level, rather than a specific political choice to be submitted to critical judgment. Returning to Galtung’s book, to begin thinking that alternatives do exist—even when we are obsessively told otherwise—is the first act of resistance against a culture of resilience that has been stripped of all transformative tension.

Naturally, for it to be possible to transform Europe into a sort of Bastiani Fortress, a preventive work of symbolic construction of the enemy is required. The enemy lies at the very origin of this profound transformation in the regime of meaning of European policies—an enemy imagined, feared, obsessively evoked, no less than invoked; an enemy almost desired. A Russian enemy which, it seems, if it did not exist, would have to be invented. In short, it is a functional and necessary enemy. The preamble to the resolution (point B) goes so far as to claim that, by choosing to “wage war on European countries or seek to destabilise them”, Russia constitutes “the most serious and unprecedented threat to world peace, as well as to the security and territory of the EU and its Member States”.

To frame Russia as an “unprecedented threat” implies that Putin today is even more dangerous than Hitler was yesterday; consequently, any possibility of negotiation with such a monster is entirely ruled out. Yet, this assessment stands in stark contrast to the EU’s stance toward other comparable international scenarios. While Putin has undeniably violated international law by invading Ukraine (which, in any case, is not an EU member state) “in order to realise its imperialist vision of the world”, Netanyahu and Trump have likewise violated international law. Yet, their actions have provoked neither a military response from the European Union nor even the mildest symbolic economic sanctions. Even if we consider only the purely material interests of the Old Continent, a potential deportation of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank would be no less destabilizing for European countries than the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Europe would risk having to manage a wave of millions of refugees seeking humanitarian protection from territories devastated by military offensives. This is to say nothing of the disastrous consequences for Europe of the war unleashed against Iran.

These contradictions are characteristic of those who advocate military confrontation with Russia, whom Marco Travaglio has dubbed *guerrapiattisti* (“war flat-earthers”): “The International Criminal Court issues arrest warrants for Netanyahu, Gallant and Hamas leaders for war crimes. Those who [...] celebrated the prospect of Putin’s imminent arrest now attack the Court—or worry that, without Bibi, any prospect of negotiations will disappear. In doing so, they expose the West’s double standard: international law is invoked against its enemies and ignored when it comes to its allies” (Travaglio 2024).

But the issue we wish to highlight here is not so much Europe’s double standards. Rather, our concern is the mimetic—and arguably paranoid—logic of a European Union that, while accusing Russia of waging war against it, also calls on “Member States to revoke all restrictions that prevent Ukraine from using Western weapon systems against legitimate military targets in Russian territory”. This rhetoric not only shapes foreign policy; it also reshapes collective memory by

encouraging new ways of reading the past. The statement by Piedmont President discussed in the Preface is a telling example thereof. Far from being an isolated rhetorical slip, it illustrates how the current political climate reinterprets historical events in ways that reinforce present political narratives. George Orwell anticipated this dynamic with remarkable clarity: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past".

### **Arm Yourself and March: The Intellectuals Who Stay Behind**

In Italy, the militarization of education is already well advanced (Mazzeo 2024). Yet one aspect is particularly striking—and perhaps even more unsettling than the current fascination with war: the persistent call to arms that, through newspapers and television talk shows, is voiced by prominent intellectuals and public commentators. From Antonio Scurati to Umberto Galimberti, via Vittorio Emanuele Parsi (2022), public discourse resonates with martial metaphors and exhortations. We are urged to become “warriors,” to take up arms, and to overcome what is described as a historical “syndrome of the helpless” (Galli della Loggia 2026). Ultimately, we are invited to abandon an allegedly irredeemable national character marked by pusillanimity and defenselessness. Some even go so far as to envisage a full-fledged “educational operation” aimed at reframing rearmament: no longer merely a response to the war in Ukraine, but a structural necessity for a “drone-threatened Europe abandoned to its fate by Donald Trump” (Mieli 2026).

Why has part of the Italian intelligentsia abandoned critical inquiry for a paranoid, bellicose parenetic discourse? This shift is striking because it occurs as the “hour of irrevocable decisions”<sup>11</sup> returns to the historical horizon. This symbolic conscription into the sacred defence of the West condenses into the paradoxical, almost farcical injunction: “arm yourself and march” (i.e. *you* fight, *I* watch). Far from acting as “warriors,” these intellectuals function instead as instruments in the production of wartime consensus and in the acceleration of the bellicisation of the public sphere.

What responsibilities do intellectuals bear today amid ongoing war mobilization? Since World War II, American-led conflicts have consistently exposed a sharp divide within the intellectual community between “responsible experts” and “idealistic madmen.” As Noam Chomsky noted in his seminal 1967 essay—republished fifty years later in 2017—this division pits the “responsible criticism” of establishment technocrats against the “sentimental,” “emotional,” or even “hysterical” critiques of intellectuals who choose public protest.

Ultimately, what separates these two camps is their loyalty to the state and its institutional frameworks. “Responsible experts” routinely serve government power. When they do question war, they do so only because it has become too costly or conflicts with perceived national interests—as occurred during the Vietnam War and the occupation of Afghanistan. Their role in broader militarization has largely been to shape public opinion by reinforcing the perception of an external threat. As Chomsky argued, there is never any need to prove that a threat exists; it is enough for the public to feel threatened.

Conversely, the “idealistic madmen”—a sneering label coined by these very experts—were intellectuals in the Dreyfusard tradition. They felt bound by a duty to the truth (or their vision of it), often in direct opposition to the state’s power politics. While responsible experts operated strictly within the boundaries set by state authority, value-oriented intellectuals used their privileged positions to question the state and its geopolitical strategies.

Today, however, the grammar of intellectual engagement has shifted. The intellectuals actively militarizing society are no longer just the traditional “responsible experts”. They have been joined

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11 On 10 June 1940, precisely with these words, Mussolini bombastically announced Italy’s entry into the war to the Nation.

by intellectuals who claim to be value-oriented, except that the "truth" they invoke to justify their call to arms now aligns perfectly with the economic and ideological interests of the state. In their view, the gap between truth and *raison d'État* has vanished: the *state of truth* has become the *truth of the State*. From this position of total alignment, they feel entitled to proclaim the moral inferiority of dissenters who oppose state policies.

The contemporary Italian debate is revealing precisely because it exemplifies this collapse. Many of the voices calling for rearmament no longer speak in the language of technocratic necessity alone. Rather than merely legitimizing *raison d'État*, they moralize it, transforming geopolitical calculation into an ethical imperative. Within this framework, the bellicisation of life is thus presented as a condition of moral regeneration. A clear example is the philosopher and psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti, who presents the recovery of the warrior *ethos* as the remedy for Europe's purported moral and anthropological decline. In a television interview, he lamented that the current generation, "as the third consecutive generation spared from conflict, has no concept of what war truly means". While admitting that "peace refines us", he warned that it also makes us hopelessly "soft". He bitterly remarked: "If Russia were to attack Italy, would our youth possess the same resilience as the Ukrainians? I seriously doubt it". For Galimberti, peace numbs the "warrior dimension"—understood in the noble sense of defending one's land and rights. Democracy, he concluded, cannot be defended merely through public protest; it must be protected against autocrats like Trump and Putin "by building up our strength to confront those who understand nothing but force". In short, European subjectivity has supposedly become *imbelle*—from the Latin *in-bellum*, meaning "soft" because it is "without war"—a term deployed to stigmatize those who have lost the backbone and moral strength required to sustain the Western will to power. We once believed that casting war aside was a gesture of civilization; now, we are told that a readiness for war is the true measure and sign of ethics. We believed war was an unforgivable and execrable barbarity; now, we must accept that our real guilt lies in having done without it for so long. Apparently, if we want to save our world and its virtues, what we truly need is a warrior subjectivation rooted in heroism.

An analogous psycho-historical interpretation has been advanced in the pages of *Corriere della Sera* by the historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia. He targets the Italian aversion to war—a stance that is in fact enshrined as a foundational constitutional principle in Article 11—and traces it back to a so-called "syndrome of the helpless". He claims this syndrome has plagued the Italian people since the tragedy of the Second World War. In his view, a "secret loss of self-confidence" and a pathological "self-contempt" pusillanimously keep the Italians from embracing what he considers a mandatory military commitment to defend Ukraine—to the point that "we no longer feel capable of anything great or important". In this perspective, it is striking how "that supreme trial which is war" is not just a plausible horizon for collective action, but a source of ethical and civic virtue. Conversely, pacifism is reduced to an impotent retreat into the self, a mere prelude to "an immobilism increasingly akin to the asphyxiation of a slow death".

For his part, Antonio Scurati—the otherwise implacable scourge of fascism—seems to have no doubts: the root of our problem is a lack of "fierce, formidable, proud, and victorious" warriors. "We Western Europeans", he explained—his tone solemn, his face bearing the inconsolable grief of someone mourning a heritage of virtues now irretrievably lost—"do not possess it, we are not it, we are it no longer". Decades of peace have supposedly bred an ethical deterioration that paves the way for civilizational decline. Eight decades of peace (this, it seems, is the true scandal, the original sin behind our cultural decay!) have evaporated our combat spirit. As a consequence, we unfortunately no longer possess "men resolute to kill and to die". Yet for our ancestors, "heroic war" was the engine of history, a "narrative that forged European identity", a "the crucible where the self was

generated", and the very foundation of Western civilization. This is the crux of the matter: for us, war once represented nothing less than a "plenary experience, a fateful event, a moment of truth wherein political forms were birthed, societal values decided, and individual and collective destinies cast". Blessed were those heroic ancient times, compared to which our current concern for "the right to health and education for all, the dismantling of machismo and racism, and the fostering of a pacifist and environmental consciousness" represents merely a "regressive advancement"—the unmistakable sign of a melancholic, craven, and disillusioned world.

In his famous 1976 interview, Martin Heidegger declared that, at this stage, "only a God can save us". Today, it seems, Scurati would counter that only War can save us, by reanimating the primitive virtues of Europeans. We note that the concept of "virtue" possesses a particularly rich semantic density worth highlighting and deconstructing. Today, "virtue" indicates goodness in a moral and spiritual sense but, etymologically, this word derives from the Latin *vir*, meaning "man" or "virile". In traditional communities, the virtue that truly mattered was essentially a man's physical strength—his untamed, virile character, which was perceived as the ultimate guarantee of triumphing over the enemy. The word "hero" belongs to the very same semantic family, stemming from the Greek *hērōs* (that is, "valiant, strong in war, warrior").

Through this etymological lens, we can unmask the unspoken scope of Scurati's cultural project: a regressive attempt to cure a citizenry he deems utterly *imbelle* (warless) by injecting it with the ancestral medicine of *virtus* (virile strength). Thus, the "heroic war" invoked by Scurati to restore our lost virtue boils down, in the end, to a matter of uncontrollable testosterone. So much for the "feminist" concession that Scurati—otherwise a politically correct progressive—deigns to make *en passant*. He recognizes that while fighting a war certainly requires weapons (such as the rearmament program launched by Ursula von der Leyen), it demands, above all, "young men (and women, if you like) capable, ready, and willing to use them"—a clear nod to the *Readiness 2030* plan, which was ultimately and hypocritically renamed, apparently at Italy's suggestion. "Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes", Bertolt Brecht famously wrote; to which we should certainly add today: and in no need of heroines, either.

Among the many *re-veiling* discourses that appeal to the "common sense" of a realist policy meant to protect us from a potential (in fact, highly likely, practically certain) aggressor, Scurati's reflection proves profoundly *revealing* precisely because of what it *re-veils*: the true drivers behind the bellicization of public discourse. To cultivate the virtue that supposedly built our civilization, we absolutely require an enemy to fight. This is the true end of our illusions: not the sudden discovery that we are defenseless without the American shield, but the conscious realization that the very virtues we Westerners are so proud of—and the civilization we consider superior—are ultimately built on the ancestral normalcy of war and a state of nature ruled by violence and oppression. Civilization itself is a regression, Scurati practically confesses, discarding all progressive fiction and hypocrisy. No enemy, no war. No war, no virtue. No virtue, no civilization—only living beings unready and unresolved to kill and to die.

### **The Power of the Neutral: For a Politics of Equiproximity**

Resisting the bellicisation of public discourse requires a new communicative paradigm. I argue that this paradigm is not one of equidistance but of equiproximity, a form of neutrality grounded in proximity to all those affected by conflict rather than detachment from it. This is where a particular concept of neutrality becomes crucial. Putin's invasion has delegitimised any voice that refuses to take sides. In the public sphere, complex analysis is dismissed as suspicious ambiguity. A rigid binary logic dominates information just as it does the battlefield: you are either a friend or an

enemy. Consequently, those who try to offer a different perspective are marginalised or accused of sympathising with the adversary.

This dynamic results in an increasingly polarised and sterile debate, trapped in rigid binaries. Nuances, internal differences, and any perspective outside the predetermined script simply disappear. Public discourse is reduced to a forced choice: either fight the latest "rogue state" (Derrida 2003) or be branded as its accomplice. Yet, reality outside the media is far more multifaceted. For instance, surveys show that sending weapons to Ukraine lacks broad consensus among Italians. This suggests that the "real Italy" is less militarised than dominant narratives imply. This gap raises a crucial question: how much space remains for a non-aligned, yet not indifferent position? Is a neutrality still possible that avoids equidistance, choosing instead an ethics of listening and understanding? In other words, a neutrality defined by equiproximity. By this term, I mean a stance that does not withdraw into indifference, but remains close to the suffering, fears, and claims of everyone caught within the conflict. Such closeness does not erase the asymmetry between aggressor and victim, nor does it suspend political responsibility. Rather, it refuses to let this asymmetry exhaust the field of perception, speech, and empathy. Equiproximity therefore concerns not the equal distribution of moral judgment, but an equal openness to the human vulnerability, suffering, and lived experience of all those involved in the conflict.

A powerful framework for this approach comes from Roland Barthes' *The Neutral* (2002), which explores the Neutral as a transformative force of language and relationships. This communicative code relies on a binary paradigm that simultaneously enables and limits meaning. The Neutral is precisely what evades and outmaneuvers what Barthes calls the "implacable binarism of the paradigm" (2002, p. 7). Adopting neutrality means experiencing the sudden suspension of established meaning, which can no longer be framed within a binary system. In this sense, the Neutral disrupts this binary order. It represents what is discarded from the paradigm, but it also cuts through it—much like the knight's move in chess, which leaps over other pieces to open new possibilities where choices seemed mandatory. By suspending the regimes of truth that dictate what is sayable, the Neutral creates space for whatever lies outside the rules. Only then can new areas of visibility unfold, allowing nuances to develop where there were once only blind spots or stark contrasts. Where the Neutral operates, it triggers a Gestalt restructuring of the binary field, proving that a *tertium datur* is finally possible. While the binary paradigm relies on mimetic oppositions, the Neutral fosters a moment of awareness. This awareness interrupts conflict and equips us to comprehend—both to contain and to welcome—even what appears inhospitable and beyond understanding. Precisely because it suspends binary opposition, the Neutral opens the possibility of inhabiting a third position—not that of the judge or arbitrator, but that of the witness. In this sense, the Neutral can be understood as a space of testimony that preserves and hosts seemingly incompatible possibilities. The figure of the witness is already embedded in the Latin term *testis*, which designates the one who stands as a third party. Close because they assist, yet distant because they are a third element relative to the disputants, the witness is called neither to judge nor to advocate. Instead, this condition of thirdness deconstructs the binary code that fuels all conflicts, from legal disputes to clashes of civilisations. In the context of Putin's war against Ukraine, for instance, dissenting from NATO policy does not imply an anti-Western stance, despite what the binary paradigm of Good versus Evil, Democracy versus Totalitarianism, or Us versus Them suggests. On the contrary, it testifies that being Western involves values other than war—such as mobilising for an open society where diversity does not turn into violent confrontation. If our challenge is to build a more hospitable society, we must first learn to live with alterity. This requires rethinking the meaning and role of communication itself, deconstructing its intrinsic binarism.

Paradoxically, in everyday language, neutrality is mostly understood in negative terms. Its very semantics reflect this: *neuter*, from the Latin *nec uter*, means "neither the one nor the other." It defines a non-place, a space detached from the contenders, carved out simply to avoid involvement. Consequently, the neutral individual is often dismissed as indifferent, timid, or opportunistic—someone who refuses to take a courageous, public stance. Neutrality is thus equated with selfishness, private interest, cowardice, or idiocy (in the Greek sense of *idiotes*, the private citizen lacking a public role or dignity). Ultimately, regardless of the moral judgment, this negative view translates into equidistance and *dis-inter-esse*—literally, not being present among the combatants. Interestingly, the Latin adjective *uter*, meaning "both the one and the other," never generated a concept of neutrality based on equiproximity—that is, as *inter-esse* ("being among") and actively sharing in the fates of opposing sides. The neutral is historically framed as someone who withdraws, never as someone who engages directly by intervening in the complex bond that simultaneously divides and unites conflicting parties. Today, the media present a Manichean view: the painful suffering of Ukrainians versus the inhumane cruelty of Russians. Almost nothing leaks through regarding the cruelty of the former or the suffering of the latter. Without media coverage, we ultimately convince ourselves that these realities simply do not exist. Yet, it is precisely within the unsaid of this black-and-white narrative that the media could foster a non-negative neutrality. This equiproximity would allow us to experience more attentively—beyond political identities and responsibilities—the shared, painful, and at times ferocious pre-political carnality of both sides. In other words, neutral communication should expose not the *what* of the belligerents—their role on the geopolitical chessboard—but the *who*: individuals crushed by a systemic logic of power that claims to act in their name, but treats them as mere disposable pawns.

Ultimately, a neutrality conceived as equiproximity, rather than equidistance, could help break the spiral of mimetic violence. Every aggression justifies itself as legitimate defence against a prior attack. This creates a backwards chain of retribution whose origin is impossible to pinpoint without making an arbitrary choice. Conflict is always simultaneously a "being against" and a "being with"—as demonstrated by the common root linking the German *wider* ("against") and the English *with*. Moreover, "being against" often occurs precisely because of having "been with"; it is an assertion of difference driven by an unbearable excess of proximity and similarity. If we truly want to interrupt mimetic rivalry and halt the escalation of violence, equidistant neutrality is not enough. The comfortable non-place of someone who claims to remain pure just to arbitrate from afar fails. Instead, we need the equiproximate neutrality of someone who enters into empathetic contact with both sides, fully witnessing the bodily suffering that this war, and all wars, inflict. Communication can do much to pave the way for peace. However, keeping the concept of neutrality alive means, first and foremost, betting on a different paradigm: a communication to come. The next section will provide a practical example.

### **The Color of Wheat: For a Pedagogy of Peace**

At a time when public discourse is increasingly shaped by bellicisation and antagonistic narratives, rereading *The Little Prince* reveals an unexpected pedagogy of peace.

A core principle for peaceful coexistence emerges in the famous episode where the protagonist meets the fox. When the fox insists on being domesticated, the narrative introduces a profound concept. Yet, the two characters start as complete opposites. They are separated by their worlds of origin (Asteroid B-612 and Earth) and their life forms (a humanoid and a wild animal). Furthermore, they differ in gender<sup>12</sup> and generation, contrasting a young boy with a fox whose

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<sup>12</sup> In the Italian, "fox" (*la volpe*) is grammatically feminine.

wisdom suggests maturity and experience. Despite these distances, the two characters succeed in "creating links" through the reciprocal bond created by domestication. This communicative relationship allows each to step outside the narrow confines of the self and access the deepest, most intimate core of the other. Crucially, this gesture does not stem from a superficial, politically correct altruism. Instead, it serves to enrich and empower one's own being.

Contrary to its common usage, "domestication" here has nothing to do with domination. Etymologically rooted in the Latin *domus* (home), it means, quite literally, making the other person one's inner house, and vice versa. Through this process, the other person is transformed. They change from an anonymous or potentially threatening entity into a meaningful presence that inhabits our most private space. How is such an encounter between diverse beings possible? Furthermore, how can this relationship exemplify the principles of a pedagogy of peace and offer a model for a peaceful, shared anthropology?

At one point, the fox explains why she wishes to be domesticated. Pointing to a wheat field, she notes that because she does not eat bread, the wheat is useless to her. It is an alien fragment of reality, a sad symbol of a missed opportunity. However, the little prince has hair the color of wheat. Once they are domesticated, the sight of the wheat field will always remind the fox of him. Through this relationship, a once-alien element of the world gains deep emotional resonance.

Reality itself remains unchanged, yet it is illuminated with new meaning through the mediation of the other—an other who comes from an entirely different world. Even if the day comes when this unusual pair of friends must part, the gain outweighs the loss. The fox will certainly weep at their farewell, missing her extraterrestrial friend. Yet, she will have received an invaluable gift: "the color of wheat." She will have integrated a new reality into her horizon of experience. This is a crucial passage: far from threatening our identity, the other enriches and expands it, allowing us to see what was previously invisible.

This narrative image allows us to reflect more broadly on the educational value of relationships with the other, especially in contexts shaped by difference and conflict. Read symbolically, this scene outlines a highly relevant paradigm for understanding identity construction and peaceful coexistence. Every authentic link extends the self rather than limiting it. While contemporary political discourse often insists that "boundaries matter" (Furedi, 2021), the symbolic lesson of the fox suggests a complementary perspective: boundaries are also places of encounter, connecting different realities rather than merely separating them. The English language highlights this effectively through the linguistic affinity between the verb *to bind* and the noun *boundary*.

This yields a precious lesson: no one is ever so distant that we cannot find a shared element to open a space for dialogue and connection. Conceived in these terms, the relationship with the other inverts the premises of violence and breaks the logic of universal conflict. The other is no longer seen as a potential enemy or a threat to our integrity. Instead, they become a bridge between ourselves and the surrounding world, both human and non-human. The other becomes a source of meaning through which we discover new perspectives—our personal zone of proximal development in existential terms.

In developmental psychology, Lev Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development as a space where an individual can grow only through relationships with others. In an existential sense, we are always transformed by a form of "learning by virtue of the other"—precisely what occurs between the little prince and the fox. For this transformation to happen, we must fundamentally rethink the other. They must no longer be viewed as a threat or a limitation, but rather embraced as an opportunity to expand our symbolic and emotional universe.

This relational understanding of identity extends beyond educational psychology. It also resonates with decolonial approaches to knowledge, which challenge the Western tendency to conceive reality as a collection of isolated entities rather than as a web of relationships. Walter D. Mignolo (2018, p. 147-148) expresses this contrast clearly: "to say that non-Western civilizations have different ontologies means to project Western categories to non-Western thinking. Most of culture and civilizations on the planet *see relations while in the West we are taught to see entities, things*. *Relations* could not be called ontological. If the vocabulary wants to be preserved then one needs to talk about *relationality* (discourses on/about relationality of the living universe). What there is depends on how we have been programmed to name what we know. Hence, the coloniality of knowledge implies the coloniality of being; they move in two simultaneous directions. The coloniality of being is instituted by racism and sexism".

Thus, colonial ontology is intrinsically *polemogenic*—it generates conflict. On the contrary, the encounter between the little prince and the fox offers a small but radical anthropology of peace. This peace is founded neither on the elimination of the other nor on their assimilation, but on active listening, recognition, and reciprocal transformation. Only in this way can we shift from the logic of war (identity *against* alterity) to the logic of relationship (identity *through* alterity). This elementary yet revolutionary lesson shows that we truly live only what we have domesticated, and what has domesticated us. This principle applies to people, but also to places, languages, and cultures.

A true education toward peace can therefore begin here: by learning to see the other not as a danger, but as a revelation of the world—a world waiting to be welcomed, embraced, and "domesticated".

### **What Peace is Made Of: From Tolerance to Desire**

Mutual domestication is indispensable not only for personal growth but also for preventing conflict. Peace cannot rest solely on the coexistence of identities that merely tolerate one another while remaining enclosed within their own boundaries—a stance epitomized by the nationalist slogan "masters in our own home". Admittedly, the current historical moment reminds us how fragile even this elementary coexistence has become. Rising intolerance among cultures, ethnicities, and nations reveals how quickly identities, when conceived as closed and self-sufficient, can revert to antagonism and violence.

Yet, the paradigm of tolerance is inherently insufficient to guarantee lasting peace. How should we behave toward the intolerant, or toward an adversary who recognizes only the logic of force? If we tolerate the intolerant without limits, we risk allowing violence to destroy both ourselves and the very conditions that make openness possible. On the other hand, if we respond to intolerance with intolerance, we undermine the very principles on which a peaceful society claims to rest. This tension has long occupied political philosophy. It underlies John Locke's reflections on religious toleration and finds its most explicit formulation in Karl Popper's famous "paradox of tolerance".

Therefore, peace cannot be secured solely through a culture of tolerance; it requires an anthropology of desire. It is not enough simply to respect others, however different they may be, while remaining indifferent to what their difference can mean for us. Rather, we must desire the encounter with alterity precisely because, in its difference, it expands and enriches our own being by opening us to new horizons of meaning. This is exactly what happens between the little prince and the fox: through their relationship, even the color of wheat becomes charged with a meaning it could never have possessed before.

True peace fundamentally requires desire rather than mere respect. If we wish to cultivate a peace that is not just the absence of armed conflict but the active care of relationships, desire must define our connection to the other. Etymologically, respect derives from the Latin *respicere*, "to look back"

or "to look again". It defines a peaceable, non-warlike approach that acknowledges the other and refrains from violating their integrity, yet it does not necessarily create the relational openness through which lives become mutually transformative. By contrast, a traditional etymological interpretation connects desire (*de-siderare*) with the stars (*sidera*), suggesting a longing for what lies beyond oneself. Desire therefore challenges the idea of identity as something complete and self-sufficient. Consequently, peace is not about managing differences, but desiring them.

This conception of peace requires moving from mere coexistence to true cohabitation. Simply accepting the other with respect is not enough to build safe, transformative, and rewarding relationships. To cultivate a culture of peaceful cohabitation, we must move beyond the reified notion of identity—a burden anthropologist Francesco Remotti (2019) urges us to drop. In its place, he proposes "resemblance," which he defines as an intricate interplay of similarities and differences rather than a fixed, self-contained identity. This shift is the first step away from ontological thinking and toward a relational framework.

The concept of identity frames cultures and individuals as externally closed and internally homogeneous (*idem* in Latin means "the same"). It leads us to overvalue internal cohesion while undervaluing the external similarities that unite us, or could unite us. At best, identity politics produce tolerance; at worst, they fuel hostility and conflict. While a self-centered identity transforms the alien into an absolute, threatening "other," an epistemology of similarity builds bridges, turning others into peers.

It is far more difficult to wage war against those we perceive as similar to ourselves. Conversely, it is much easier to unleash destructiveness upon people to whom we feel completely disconnected, and whose shared humanity we may not even recognize. Indeed, the more we dehumanize those who are different, the less we are inhibited from using violence against them. To domesticate, on the other hand, means to mutually recognize and humanize each other. It means learning to appreciate the similarities that unite us, viewing differences not as threats to fear, but as desirable stimuli—opportunities to grow and transform our own inner horizons. Ultimately, the success of nonviolence always depends on a dynamic interplay between the Self and the Other; or rather, on a relational dynamic in which the Self incorporates the Other while also projecting itself into the Other.

As Johan Galtung argued (1989), reflecting on the Vietnam War, nonviolence succeeds only when it forces oppressors to confront the pain they have caused. This mechanism fails if the oppressed are completely ignored, or if they are framed as dangerous radicals whose suffering is self-inflicted. The dynamic worsens when victims are dehumanized through cultural stereotypes—such as the Western trope that Asians value life less and therefore grieve less over the loss of family. Without a recognized, shared humanity, empathy becomes impossible. Ultimately, only a peace grounded in a genuine openness to the other can break the cycle of isolation and mutual suspicion. Only then does peace cease to be a fragile truce and become a sustainable form of shared life.

### **The Quiet Ethics of the Just**

We have denounced the growing bellicisation of public discourse in Italy, where prominent intellectuals invoke a return to the "warrior spirit" and lament the ethical decay allegedly caused by decades of peace. They frame this readiness for war as the moral foundations of Europe, masking it behind the rhetoric of virtue and the defense of democracy. Conversely, these same *mâitres à penser* view peace not as a κτήμα ἐς αἰεί—a permanent possession to preserve and pass down to future generations—but as a weakness to overcome in order to reclaim a supposedly lost greatness.

We believe that words must be disarmed and alternative paths explored to save the world—the entire world, not just our corner of it. No corner of the world can save itself alone, even if it were the most heavily armed and warlike of all.

Realistically, we do not imagine that this ethical stance can by itself avert the catastrophe of war. Yet, what we can—and must—do is remain as resistant as possible to the ongoing bellicose transformation of daily life. Only then can we help foster non-belligerent dispositions and structures of feeling. We draw here on the anti-heroic values expressed, for example, in Jorge Luis Borges' poem *Los Justos* (The Just). In his work, the world is saved neither by warriors nor heroes, but by the "just"—anonymous men and women who are granted no official role in saving the world, and who do not even claim one for themselves.

Yet, as the great Argentine writer explains, it is precisely these people, the just ones "*que se ignoran*"<sup>13</sup>, who daily make an essential contribution to saving the world. They do so through ordinary practices and quiet pleasures, opposing the heroic virtues of warriors with what we might call the "inoperative ordinariness" of shared life. They do so by living in harmony with the environment ("a man who cultivates his garden"), in empathy with non-human life ("who strokes a sleeping animal"), and with a sense of care and responsibility toward their work ("The potter, contemplating color and form / The typographer who sets this page well, though it may not please him"). They find fulfillment in music and literature ("He who is grateful for the existence of music," "He who is grateful for the existence of Stevenson"), and possess the curiosity of "He who takes pleasure in tracing an etymology"—delighting in the discovery that past meanings were once conceived differently, and can therefore change again in the present. Above all, they do so with the gentleness and generous openness of one "who prefers others to be right."

Borges' concept of the "just man" recalls the figure of the *mite* (the mild person) described by Norberto Bobbio (1993) as an example of civic virtue. For Bobbio, the mild person "does not engage with others to compete, conflict, or win" (p. 16). The great political philosopher explains that such an individual lives entirely "outside the spirit of competition, rivalry, and victory" (*ibid.*). Their aim is to inhabit "a history without winners or losers, precisely because there are no struggles for primacy, power, or wealth—lacking the very conditions that divide humanity into victors and losers" (p. 17).

Crucially, mildness does not mean submissiveness; confusing it with fear or meekness would be a fatal error. To cite Bobbio again, the mild person rejects destructive competition "out of a sense of unease and a perception that its goals are vain. They feel deeply detached from the goods that spark common greed, and they lack vanity or vainglory—the very passion that Hobbes blamed for the war of all against all, which drives men to excel. Finally, they completely lack the stubbornness that perpetuates quarrels over nothing, avoiding the cycle of retaliation and revenge that ultimately leads either to mutual destruction or to the triumph of one over the other" (*ibid.*).

Similarly, the person who—as Borges notes—prefers to yield the point to others does not do so out of cowardice or a desire for a quiet life, nor because they believe the others are necessarily right. Rather, they do it because they value remaining open and sensitive to other perspectives. To use Bobbio's words, it is about "letting others be who they are."

This way of thinking rejects simplistic Manichean views. Absolute rightness never belongs to one side alone, just as absolute error does not belong to the other. Instead, there are numerous conflicting reasons that should be listened to, discussed, and brought into a common space of

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13 The English translation renders *que se ignoran* simply as "unaware", whereas the Spanish allows for a richer ambiguity: it may refer both to people who are unaware of their own merit and to people who go unnoticed or are overlooked by history.

dialogue—even if this does not lead to complete consensus. Disagreement is an inevitable outcome that must be anticipated and accepted as such. Yet, what makes the failure to reach an *understanding* with others truly unforgivable is the refusal to *understand* their reasons. It is the refusal to even try to approach them, choosing instead to quickly dismiss them by labeling them as an enemy for internal political gain. In this sense, the reasonableness of the just man is expressed precisely through his ability to give voice to opposing perspectives. The goal is not to mediate them in a chimerical search for an ideal balance—the kind of "just peace" often wielded as a declaration of war—but rather to recognize these reasons and make them visible to one another. Ultimately, it is not the sleep of Reason that generates monsters, but rather a self-induced deafness to the reasons of others. Above all, monsters are generated when we fail to recognize our own inner darkness, a blindness that justifies misplaced superiority and latent supremacist impulses.

### **Critique and Clinic: Disarming Discourse, Caring for the World**

A form of reason capable of making sense of the reasons of others must be as critical as it is clinical. To foster a genuine culture of peace, we must balance the practice of critique with that of the clinic, holding them in productive tension (Deleuze 1993). A critique stripped of its clinical dimension risks becoming an arbitrary exercise of power; similarly, a clinic detached from critique easily degenerates into mere justification.

Disarming words means balancing two fundamental orientations: the lucidity of distinction (typical of critique) and the care for relationships (proper to the clinic). This, in our view, is the crucial task of the thinker in times of threatened or active warfare—the polar opposite of the irresponsible odes sung today by certain intellectuals who weaponize public discourse.

The word "critique" comes from the Greek verb *krínein*, which essentially means "to separate". To engage in critique is to separate heterogeneous elements, returning each to its specific category. We engage in critique whenever we separate the pure from the impure, the true from the false, the just from the unjust, while integrating similar elements under a single category, regardless of their nuances.

We must not overlook the intrinsic violence of this operation. Critique partitions the experiential continuum to establish rigid classifications and hierarchies. In short, to categorize is always to put reality on trial: the continuous is transformed into the discrete, while what is only partially different is homogenized within a single logical and ontological group. Indeed, in ancient Greek, *katēgoréō* means "to accuse", deriving from *ageírō* ("to gather, collect") and *agorá* ("the public square", the place of assembly). In this sense, the critique that separates and categorizes is deeply rooted in the language of the courtroom.

The semantic constellation around the word "clinic", however, follows a different logic. Derived from the Greek *klínein* ("to incline, to bend"), it evokes the capacity to bridge separate spaces and unite distinct elements. The act of bending toward someone—perhaps to offer care and aid—establishes a relationship between two different proxemic spheres: the intimate space of the other and the personal space of the caregiver. One leans forward to enter the space of the person lying down, while remaining grounded in one's own personal space.

The clinic is a situated form of knowledge, operating not through abstractions but through presence, listening, and proximity. Rather than merely watching from a distance and judging, it accepts the reciprocity of encounter. Within the clinic, judgment is suspended, complexity is embraced, and an ethics of attention is practiced. In this sense, the clinic resists simplification and the haste to diagnose, catalog, or condemn. Instead, it recognizes the vulnerability of precarious lives—as thematized, for instance, by Judith Butler (2004)—as the primary site of understanding. This

bending, this leaning toward the other without dominating them, can become a profound way to pacify discourse and care for the world.

### **Merchant's Ears: Wilful Deafness in the Age of War-Realism**

Across Europe, several languages share a similar idiom—such as “*fare orecchie da mercante*” in Italian or “*Händlerohren machen*” in German—used to describe those who, out of indifference or sheer apathy, cling to their old routines even when faced with unprecedented crises that demand a decisive change of course. The person who “has a merchant's ears” fails to hear—or pretends not to hear—that the world around them is spiraling, making any return to business-as-usual impossible. The merchant of the proverb must possess ears trained to filter out the surrounding noise, focusing solely on what matters: the transaction. He prides himself on being a realist who deals with the world as it is, steering clear of any idealistic desire to transform it. After all, markets—and by extension, merchants—thrive on stability and predictability. Anything falling outside this narrow, profit-driven worldview, whether environmental collapse or social inequity, simply goes unheeded. In short, he remains willfully deaf, even when his own enterprise is a driving cause of the very emergencies threatening others and the world at large.

The figure of the merchant—impermeable to anything that eludes utilitarian calculation—is more than an individual metaphor; it reflects a broader anthropological disposition. This very systemic blindness has recently characterized the cultural stance of Europe toward major global challenges. In the dark, difficult times we live under the weight of what is called the “third world war in pieces,” the European Union appears to have turned a deaf ear as well. By treating the economy as autonomous while subordinating politics to market imperatives—and framing social and environmental justice merely within the framework of neoliberal governance—it has ignored the geopolitical imbalances emerging along its southern and eastern borders. It has failed to grasp the gravity of the socioeconomic and ecological crises driven by its own development model, overlooking how these two emergencies are, in fact, two sides of the same coin (Gallino 2015).

Europe chose to turn a deaf ear precisely when it should have engaged more deeply in caring for the world. Now, it relies on weapons because the world has become increasingly unsafe—ignoring the fact that rearmament actively fuels this insecurity. Yet true security, a state of safety free from anxiety, is only achieved when the greatest care is dedicated to our relationships with others (Mauro 2025). Stripped of this care, security is invoked as a mere mantra, degenerating into a security obsession marked by fortified borders and reinforced arsenals.

Conversely, the friendship between peoples that fosters genuine freedom and safety requires the ability to build communities. It rejects the immunogenic impulse to withdraw and protect oneself from those with different values and interests (Esposito 1998, 2002). Tellingly, in German, the words for freedom (*Freiheit*) and friendship (*Freundschaft*) share the same semantic root. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han has observed, true freedom is experienced only within meaningful relationships and a harmonious coexistence with the other (Han 2014). This perspective highlights how the neoliberal conception of freedom, centered on self-sufficiency and individual competition, is actually a subtle form of imprisonment. A lack of connection and interdependence does not merely diminish our freedom; it alienates us from our most *common* vital needs—in the dual sense of being both “ordinary” and “shared”.

In short, our continent—the cradle of Western civilization—gradually adopted a form of tunnel vision, growing blind to realities and urgencies that elude the market imperatives of *homo oeconomicus*. Consequently, it ignored the systemic risks and negative externalities these imperatives entail, at the expense of the common good and the entire biosphere.

For a long time, we took it for granted that we were progressing toward definitive prosperity, while in reality, we were unwittingly shaping the conditions of our own decline. For years, we have been trapped within the horizon of “capitalist realism,” a framework that presents itself as the absence of any alternative. As the late philosopher and sociologist Mark Fisher famously explained, capitalist realism is the pervasive feeling that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system today, but that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it (Fisher 2009). Paradoxically, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Yet this realism—a legacy of the Thatcher era—proves deeply unrealistic when measured against human survival. It exposes a profound rift between the institutional rhetoric of the common good and its material reality. The success of the few no longer translates into the welfare of the many—contrary to the promises of trickle-down economics—and the relentless pursuit of individual profit now actively jeopardizes collective well-being rather than guaranteeing it.

After decades of capitalist realism, public discourse is now shifting toward a new paradigm: “war-realism”—an unconfessable continuation of capitalist realism by other means. It is a well-known paradox that while war demands capital, nothing generates capital quite like war. Today, the rearmament race is framed as the only viable response to the Russian threat. This is the core tenet of war-realism, encapsulated in Vegetius’s classic adage that peace is achieved only by preparing for war. Consequently, any argument advocating for arms limitation is dismissed as naive, clashing with a dual “sense of reality”: one rooted in the defensive imperative, the other in the conviction that only a new war economy can sustain economic growth. Yet, much like its capitalist predecessor, war-realism is profoundly unrealistic, as it actively dismantles the common good. Here lies the true convergence between the entrepreneur and the general: both claim to be realists, yet both remain willfully deaf to the consequences of their actions.

By contrast, the perspective driving pacifist discourse is a “realism of utopia” (Balducci and Grassi 1983). True naivety and historical blindness do not belong to those calling for peace and disarmament, but to the self-proclaimed pragmatists who insist on securing peace through weaponry. Historical evidence reinforces this point. As Michael Wallace notes, “those who seek ‘peace through preparation’ mis-read history and, as a result, set a dangerously unrealistic course of action” (1981, p. 95). Analyzing 99 military disputes between 1820 and 1964, Wallace (1979) demonstrated a statistically significant correlation between arms race dynamics and escalation processes leading directly to war. In 82% of the cases studied, arms races culminated in open conflict, compared to only 4% of disputes that escalated without a prior arms buildup. This empirical evidence severely challenges the validity of the Latin adage *si vis pacem, para bellum*—a maxim brandished all too casually in recent public debates, including by the Italian Prime Minister, to justify rearmament policies within NATO and the European Union.

### **The Planetary Agenda: Overcoming the Severing and the Anthropocentric Matrix**

The European stance analyzed thus far—manifested today primarily in its foreign and economic policies—reflects a much deeper cultural and symbolic order. It is the expression of a civilizational model that has anchored its identity to a specific narrative of freedom, progress, and planetary mastery. To understand the current European impasse, it is worth recalling the critical reflections that have sought to deconstruct the dominant narratives of Western modernity.

The compounding crises we face—climate change, pandemics, mass migration, famine, and systemic inequality—increasingly demonstrate that the end of the world is no longer an abstract possibility. Instead, it looms as a concrete reality unless we imagine a systemic alternative to our current way of life and, more broadly, to the anthropocentric model that Jeremy Rifkin terms “The

Age of Progress" (2022). This age embodies the persistent conviction that our species is forged from a substance entirely distinct from that of other creatures sharing the Earth, thereby destining humans to exploit all available resources and dominate every non-human living being. This assumption is so deeply rooted that it has rendered us deaf to any voice reminding us of our ecological belonging within the wider living world.

This deafness to the natural world, which Rifkin attributes to the ideology of progress and a sense of anthropocentric superiority, has been extensively critiqued by contemporary thinkers. Among them, Timothy Morton (2019) terms the foundational fracture between the human and the non-human as “the severing”—a deep partition that has shaped the anthropology of modernity and prevented the emergence of a planetary ecological consciousness. This Cartesian matrix continues to govern our behavior and existential outlook, even as we tragically experience its unsustainability. Indeed, if the devastating COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it is that no sealed boundaries exist between nature and culture; hence, drawing a sharp dichotomy between the biological and the socio-cultural is entirely obsolete. Just as no environment remains immune to the consequences of human activity, the phenomenon of zoonosis has demonstrated that human society is not immune to what happens to an ordinary bat (Quammen 2022). In light of this, the famous line by the Roman playwright Terence—*homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*—should be expanded and reformulated: *nothing non-human is alien to me*.

Challenging this foundational split requires developing a cultural, psychological, and political agenda on a planetary scale. This agenda must encompass everything that the contemporary social system traditionally excludes from protection, recognition, and solidarity—and which, consequently, we feel authorized to exploit indefinitely as a mere economic resource. Indeed, most costs associated with the capitalist development model are systematically obscured or externalized, from the exploitation of reproductive labor (which encompasses family life itself) to the progressive depletion of environmental resources.

The economic and social system, still largely centered on fossil capital (Malm 2020), is essentially sustained by the parasitic consumption of non-renewable resources that lie outside its narrow field of vision, refusing to know what lies beyond its own calculations. This self-referential system, much like the *homo oeconomicus* discussed earlier, turns a deaf ear to the world: it refuses to listen to anything that eludes its profit calculations, systematically ignoring the ecological warning signs of the very environment it exploits.

There is no “elsewhere” in the world where the costs generated by our social system can be permanently discharged. We must widen our perspective and include within the collective balance sheet of our species everything we destroy—realities that ordinarily remain invisible to us. As humans, we are called to a task commensurate with the stakes. We must confront the global risks we face as a species and, consequently, profoundly redefine our values, collective priorities, and public discourse, alongside our governance mechanisms and our very relationship with the biosphere. Ultimately, this necessitates a radical transformation of the very subjectivities that our era tends to produce.

If neoliberal governmentality found its emblematic figure in *homo oeconomicus*, and if the current bellicose turn positions *homo strategicus* at its center, the challenge we now face is to imagine different ways of inhabiting the planet—modes of existence founded not on competition or mutual threat, but on recognizing the profound interdependence linking humans to one another and to the rest of life. In short, we must learn to listen to what we have for too long denied with our willfully deaf ears: the silent cry of the living, of the other, of Gaia (Lovelock 1979).

In this scenario, it is deeply disheartening to observe how the wars we insist on preparing for—precisely as the ecological crisis exposes our shared vulnerability—evoke a famous image from Alessandro Manzoni’s literature: that of Renzo’s capons, which violently peck at one another even as they are carried bound together toward the slaughterhouse. Viewing the world solely through the lens of strategic rationality leaves us deaf to the true nature of the challenges before us.

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