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## Book Review: Irving Louis Horowitz, *The Idea of War and Peace: The Experience of Western Civilization*

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# Book Review

Irving Louis Horowitz, *The Idea of War and Peace: The Experience of Western Civilization*, 3rd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006. Pp. 364, paper. \$29.95 US.

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The third edition of *The Idea of War and Peace* is appropriately timed, considering the prominence of the Iraq war in the popular discourse, amplified by the intensity of the presidential campaign in the United States. While his endeavor is more broadly framed, Irving Louis Horowitz, Hannah Arendt University Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, nevertheless offers a worthy, thought-provoking contribution valuable to generalists and students of political theory alike.

Horowitz seeks to understand the causes of war with the aim of extracting an integrated theory of peace. To pursue this question, he scrutinizes a sample of thinkers whose arguments embody dominant themes in the field of peace studies, ranging from the “subjective positivism” of Bertrand Russell to the “Providential harmony” of Alfred North Whitehead to the “humanism” of Albert Einstein. In fact, the mix of influences seems a bit eclectic, but it works because of the breadth of ideas brought to the table.

The analysis divides according to a “consistent dualism” in the study of war and peace. “On one side is political idealism,” Horowitz explains,

which is identified by its placing of primary causation in subjective or introspective factors, such as innate propensities to violence, inherent human restlessness, or the spirit of adventurism and heroism realized fully only in combat. Standing in sharp contrast is political realism, which is characterized by its belief in the primacy of external, socially conditioned causes of aggression. (24)

It is clear from the outset that Horowitz identifies himself as a realist, and he bases much of his critique of the idealist school on the disconnect between their assumptions and the historical evidence. Realism simply offers greater leverage over the question, because it operates from empirical observation.

To understand the causes of war, Horowitz asserts, we must understand the social structures within which we live. This is not as easy as it sounds, however. He rebukes a number of realist thinkers for confusing the causes of war because they wrongly identify the social structures that affect behavior. Emery Reves, for example, targets the contradictions of the modern state, arguing that scientific, technological, and industrial developments have increased the reliance of the individual upon the state for protection while simultaneously destroying the capacity of the state to provide for this end other than through violent means. Ultimately Reves promotes a universal association of humankind and an end to the nation-state. Yet according to Horowitz, this scheme is doomed to failure, since Reves does not account for uneven development between nations, which would likely intensify conflict within a larger international legal community.

In fact, Horowitz’s analysis of realism as well as of idealism rests upon a core belief in the material foundations of society, which, in turn, condition our understanding of

what we want and need as well as of the most appropriate and effective means to achieve either end. The roots of conflict lie in our alienation from what we desire. This is essentially a material question; the usual suspects—ideology, morality, politics, and power—are derivative phenomena. It is critical to recognize, however, that the cause of war in the abstract also lays the groundwork for a sustainable peace, as humanity continues to innovate and evolve in order to overcome its alienation and master nature. Horowitz identifies this “progress” as a motive force for peace in two respects. On the one hand, humans are better able to provide for their needs, thereby lessening tensions attributable to economic and technological differences. On the other, and perhaps more significantly, peace acquires practical value in the furtherance of progress. War is anathema to progress, because it threatens our very existence while eroding our material gains. The incentives to employ violence merely reflect our frustrations with being out of step with reality.

To be clear, “progress” implies neither the transcendence of a single worldview or value system nor the dissolution of the differences that otherwise complicate social relations. Peace therefore requires the acceptance of “the varieties of human existence” and the pursuit of alternative means to resolve conflict aside from war (39, 247). To Horowitz, this is a rational conclusion sustained by a basic, mutual desire to secure one’s living conditions and satisfy one’s needs. As the facilitator of these ends, progress binds us together by an “ethic of survival” that is persuasive because it appeals to a shared material interest rather than to a vaunted sense of morality derived from fixed or absolute principles that do more to disappoint and distract than to unify us with what we want.

The difficulty involves leading the individual to accept this claim and to overturn conventional understandings of the linkage between survival and war. Horowitz eschews the hedonistic undertones and instead appeals to a sort of higher rationality. He issues a moral imperative based upon a materialist logic: we must agree in common to use reason only for “constructive ends . . . promoting the progress of civilization” (246). In following, he argues, we must commit ourselves to peace in order to secure the free exchange of ideas and “the flowering of human life as a necessary condition for the development and enrichment of thought and practice” (246).

In a curious turn, Horowitz appears to concede that this moral imperative may not be sufficient, as much as it is necessary. If progress is an inherent facet of human history, then why have we yet to rationalize peace in similar terms? Horowitz locates the answer in the contradictions of our current age: We are both blessed and cursed by our unmatched capacity to produce, which has contributed to an equally unmatched capacity to destroy. In this light, a philosophy of survival is compelling. It appeals to a fundamental interest in sustaining existence in the face of war’s sheer destructive potential. Remove this primer or lessen its severity, however, and the ethic may remain unrealized in situations just as dire but lesser in scope.

When the first edition of *The Idea of War and Peace* appeared in 1956, Horowitz was duly inspired by a fear of nuclear annihilation—a fear one might enlarge to include any such catastrophe that imperils existence so completely. We need not stretch our imagination to any great lengths to recognize that genocide should similarly provoke us. It represents such a radical breakdown of the social order that survival appears to hinge upon the violent purification of “self” from “other.” In theory, the logic of progress should prompt those on the ground to recognize their mutual differences or, at least, inspire a reaction from those in a position to intervene. Yet the persistence of genocide in the post-Cold War world hints at the limits of the ethic

of survival in the face of threats to “progress” that are seemingly small and remote—threats that fail to capture the public imagination to the same degree that nuclear war once did. The point is not that the ethic of survival falls to pieces when we are out from under the shadow of total destruction. Rather, in light of recent history—which is the measure Horowitz prefers—more may be required than a material imperative to inspire our better angels. In this respect, principle may play a greater role in shoring up our resolve and confronting our complacency.

Genocide is but one of many pressing concerns that would benefit from elaboration. Unfortunately, Horowitz deliberately leaves the body of the text untouched and looks no further than the range of scholars addressed in the first edition. The later chapters appear to be an afterthought, a surprisingly clumsy attempt to contextualize without closely revisiting content. As a result, the reader is left to infer the relevance of the survival ethic to the post–Cold War world, which is not entirely clear or consistent. This is troublesome for a book that purports to provide practical guidance in the promotion of peace.

We need not judge based solely on this criterion, however. The book inarguably brings to the fore powerful observations of how the Western mind has grappled with a grave subject. Admittedly, there are uncomfortable moments (Horowitz’s likening of Lenin to Gandhi is perhaps a touch overzealous). But on the whole Horowitz offers a deeply informed and intelligent treatment of a number of thinkers whose ideas contribute to a rigorous understanding of what is at stake in the study of war and peace. His analysis is careful and deliberate, achieving an admirable thoroughness and clarity of expression. Therefore, a close reading cannot help but provoke thought and sustain a debate that may never resolve itself, in spite of our best intentions. The true challenge lies in acting upon this understanding without sliding into despair or irresponsibility. Rather, we must continually subject what we believe to intense—some might say ruthless—scrutiny. Perhaps herein we find this book’s greatest value: In the struggle to understand the machinations of war and peace, we may discover the cross-cutting ties that bind us, regardless of our particular disposition—and, further, from this we may derive some measure of hope from the continued pursuit of the better stuff of our humanity.