

the illusion of just war

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It is important to clarify that this critique does not extend to liberation movements or defensive wars waged in response to direct aggression. Nor does it dismiss complex interventions aimed at preventing mass atrocities. Rather, the focus here is on the systemic use of war as a tool of expansion, economic domination, and political control, often justified under the guise of moral legitimacy or international order. The literature available and the rules of engagement that exist around the definition of war are complex; in this essay it is understood that a state actor is in explicit armed conflict with another.

The post-war debate remains incomplete, largely as colonial powers have failed to acknowledge their historical roles and the enduring impacts of their actions. Current power structures continue to resist framing this legacy with empathetic context, an essential lens for understanding the violence lingering in an empirical shadow. As a result, this brutality is allowed to mature without ramifications, solidifying that violence favours a preconceived habit. This essay explores how Decolonial thought reveal war not as a necessary evil or catalyst for progress, but a deliberate tool of power, capital and control, disguised in morality and perpetuated through human suffering.

When fully comprehending the nature of modern warfare, it is essential to examine the ethics of colonisation. Decolonial theory offers a critical framework for this, but must engage with Realism. Realism argues that the competitive nature of global politics influences the framework in which state actors conduct themselves. It asserts that states act rationally in their self-interest rationalising domination, preemptive strikes, or prolonged occupation in the name of security.

In practice, it is most effective when the international system threatens state objectives, causing a drift in the protection of the state and their personal political beliefs. This was evident during World War II, when Britain and the United States aligned against Nazi Germany, and later, when Western Europe consolidated against the Soviet Union. In both cases, Realist logic propped up the pursuit of the balance of power, legitimising intervention and expansion under strategic necessity.

Realist narratives rarely confront the colonial foundations on which its logic rests. Decolonial theory disrupts this by linking European hierarchies to modern knowledge systems and frameworks of legitimacy. Central to this critique is settler colonialism, which reveals the embedded matrix of power that still shapes societal and governmental structures. Decoloniality interrogates the epistemic violence that constructs colonial dominance as rational, legal, and humanitarian. This introduces symmetry with the view of combatants and non-combatants; the relationship between the invading Europeans and the indigenous population. A promotion of balance is alluded but presented as abject. Non-combatants being harmed extensively is defended under the doctrine of unintentional. This is falsely excused within legality, allowing permitted harm as long as the claim in the beginning was to further imperialist exploration theories. This allows powerful actors, in this case Western militaries, to avoid responsibility for the suffering they cause.

Compounding this failure is a deeper moral blindness. The refusal to recognise non-combatants as fully human in their individuality makes it easier to ignore the depth of harm done to them. Categorising the non-combatant as a precursor to consequences changes the play of war itself. Identifying them in what they offer to capitalistic ventures, economic weight or misbelieved champion rhetoric, makes the precedent of the violence experienced inherent. This approach makes the structure of understanding colonialism sensible, as it describes that being seen as a non-combatant came with privileges and excuses as to whether or not they were seen as human. The existing legal and ethical frameworks of this matrix are used in war to perpetrate the illusion of protecting noncombatants by granting them rights. However, these protections are undermined by loopholes that allow harm.

With the independence of colonies in WWII, a screened privilege stands with combatant actors, as they are excluded from the conversation. The false positive starts to crack with the disparity in economic standing, culminating with a lack of acknowledgement regarding moral values during the times of colonial persecution. Haiti had to pay France 150 million francs for its independence in 1804. Since they were the most lucrative colony, compensation needed to be made justified by their own narrative framework that solidified their ideologies. Doing so plunged the society into a stunted chaos: trying to stay afloat with money that they did not have, inadvertently influencing ailing systems from a lack of order. The French government has resisted calls for reparations, instead admitting to a historic injustice, with a shared committee shallowly echoing a shared past. This elucidates a structure providing a false equivalence; appearing reasoned within moral confines where none exists, making the supposed symmetry between coloniser and colonised profoundly distorted.

Upholding the right to occupy is very much alive and the capital venture is not disguised as widely as it is accepted. Capital morale being the starter of almost all modern day conflict, culminates in validity. The Ukraine-Russia conflict is an astute example of this insidious reasoning. Minerals, farmland and energy reserves were found in 2013, coincidentally cut short of developing in 2014 because of the Russian invasion of Crimea, where the bulk of these materials reside. A lot of the country's deposits exist in the eastern and southern regions, subsequently now near the front line or under Russian occupation. Donald Trump vowed to give them aid but only under an exchange for rare and valuable raw minerals. This tailspin Russia's reasoning to why the invasion happened in the first place, dispelling narratives on identity politics, and inadvertently open avenues for the country to be exploited during a period where they are vulnerable.

The war that Israel has launched on Palestine, specifically the Gaza Strip, also has this malevolent vein. A development that is convoluted because of the leadership of the Gaza Strip and a dispute that goes back to 1999 developing a gas field. It could contribute to Palestine's financial freedom and independence, but is constantly plagued by Israel's aggression to pursue such a trove, regularly subjecting to maritime border disputes between Lebanon, Cyprus and Palestine respectively. Although the area can be seen as riddled with differing historical avenues, one thing is certain: in the expedited race for resources in a world that is running out of them, the so-called "mediocre" size of the natural gas area does not matter. Who has jurisdiction over that, however, holds the presiding weight that comes with power in such an oil rich region.

These examples highlight the economic mechanisms at play in extreme conflict. With this in mind however, the direct relationship between GDP and warfare remains ambiguous due to the complexities in measuring both the inputs and outcomes. It is up to the nation, and in most cases, there is no index that accounts for the mass killing of people, whether civilian or soldier. Although weapons production and manufacturing in support of the war effort count very positively towards singular and certain respective industries GDP, the blip comes when there is no account of the human destruction waged and the adverse effects on the future. There is no shortage of consequences like inflation, lower trade and unemployment, even if employment is generated during the war, creating an unfair surplus. There are barely any studies to show that there are positive nor negative effects on the GDP per capita during war, and the ones that are there are highly inconsistent with their findings.

The effects on human life have severe downfalls such as extreme poverty, food scarcity, de-globalisation and unstable environmental factors. Any preexisting global economic trends, such as a recession, could make things worse. The Institute for Economics and Peace found that in the current ten countries that have the highest economic cost of violence, they lose an average of 41% of their economic output as a direct result of this violence. Stable countries, however, only use 3.9% of their GDP respectively. Countries that do not reap capitalistic benefits like their developed counterparts, or are not allowed to progress in the world, have devastating effects on the people and contribute to a daily struggle for survival.

Environmentally, a catacomb in the form of unexploded weapons from World War II in Europe and chemical warfare from the Vietnam War, pollute modern day ecosystems and public health. In societies like Liberia, the Balkans, and Gaza, social fabric has been ruptured, causing communities to suffer further with irreparable damage in psych, body and forcing intergenerational mistrust and trauma. War is not only negatively prolific in its messaging but part of something more sinister than control; a lack of care, repercussions or aid for human life in zones of immediate conflict.

Demographically, World War I and II resulted in millions of military and civilian deaths, destabilising global populations. The psychological toll is long-lasting: descendants of World War II survivors in Germany and the Netherlands have exhibited inherited trauma responses, anxiety, and behavioral disorders, potentially due to changes in their DNA sequence. Socioeconomic damage compounds these effects: this is seen in Syria where the war has had catastrophic consequences, declining and undermining existence. Prior to the conflict, Syria's GDP was around \$62 billion, but by 2020 it had plummeted to around \$13 billion, leading to youth unemployment surging to 50% and national poverty reaching a staggering 70%. With those numbers, it is impossible to navigate parts of daily life, nevertheless deviate from a system that is legitimately defeated.

In the immediate toll of death and displacement, secondary crises such as famine, drought and genocide arise, resulting from a systemic collapse. The core pillars of human development are disrupted in favour of a splinter in stability and social cohesion, irrevocably altering the way that societies, nations and individuals are shaped. With the collective identity of religion, social status, civil issues, territorial, ideological and even revenge uniting together extremely firmly. That mindset influences humans to be part of a group; a subtext of an inherent social community lies within tribes, villages and cities. A bandwagon effect takes place; a cognitive bias where individuals adopt the values and behaviors of those around them, driven by the influence of a shared collective and the perception that others are acting in the same way.

The proximity and repetition play a heavy part in this phenomenon as herd mentality comes to the forefront, starting to ignore other sentiments one may have, in favour of following a group because others are doing it.

There is some leeway in relativity when the normal is not followed, but when people come together in a shared purpose, identity or belief — a collective is not challenged, making it hard for an individual to have a separate opinion, especially if there was a weaker countenance in the beginning or susceptibility to more pushback. A powerful and underrated tool that makes people feel they are part of something larger, becoming easier to rationalise and follow whatever is being promoted, regardless if it is truthful or not.

This theory shows up within the perspectives and attitudes of conflict. In wartime, this bias becomes amplified; public opinion starts to become truth and media portrayals are more relevant than fact. That propaganda uses messaging that gives meaning to emotional and social benefits to propagate violence and conflict to give clarity to confusion. Committing, adhering, or condoning violence in prose is not only going to be upsetting, but extremely convoluting. Seeing such injury and by extension, fear, is a recipe that ends up using methods of interpreting widespread support as validation and motivation to join the majority. The dynamic is further strengthened by a rally-round-the-flag effect, in which national crises trigger surges in public support for leaders and government policies, especially when the opposition remains silent, is depleted or suppressed, or leaders project a sure form of unity to catalyze their message. The repetitiveness of bandwagoning and rally phenomena creates a powerful feedback loop into public consensus and bolsters visibility that inadvertently puts forth an individual's willingness to support the effort. This legitimises them further and their backing, reinforcing a lack of critical dissent.

Through the stipulations and theories laid out before, conflict sold to a demographic has adverse effects, no matter if it is for the preconceived notion of better or worse. The global economic impact of violence is at a staggering 14.4 trillion, according to the 2021 Economic Value of Peace report, an egregious amount of money that usually does not fight in the face of adversity, but employs religion, class, territorial, tribal, retaliation and revenge mechanisms to continue forth with egotistical ideals. They are carried out in modern day because of the monetary value involved. The benefit to a niche amount of people, particularly in technology, manufacturing, military and pharmaceutical industries is expected. In the United States and the United Kingdom, military spending reached 40% during the First and Second World Wars, boosting production GDP. GDP per capita then drops in general, to about 9% before it starts to recover.

This sentiment is not shared, however, for countries that do not have the same status as powerful entities in the West - theirs can drop from 40-70%, like the wars in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Iran) and Eastern Europe in the 1990s (Bosnia, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan).

War advocates use this information and twist it to create a sense of identity to bring to the people; reverence, hope, strength and ultimately peace. Myths like war backing innovation illustrate how it is used as a point of connection, but ultimately fall flat and only contribute to the validity of war in the present. Arguing that an upheaval in a power structure and the imbalance procured for people to take advantage, is not contentious, it is true. It creates technological advances; usually for military advancement that have been used in afterthought for non-military purposes, such as radar that was developed for World War II by the British. That is a coincidence that has played out in society for a benefit; an advancement that does not encompass all industries but a few, and that does not have the well-being of all when it is made. The grounds for that prosperity become shrouded in malice when it lies in erasure. The myth disillusion that there is a point in that death, and whilst that can be true in certain retrospects in history, it is artificially and overwhelmingly fictitious. It is not the innovation itself that is inherently malicious, but the implication of that technology to excuse the violent system that produced it. There is a censorship of non-combatants, intent and the prosperity in these systems creating false valour.

The monetary currency of war shrouds and erases civilians. Even if the outcome shows as catastrophic, the understanding becomes uncomplicated with messaging to accept such moral failure. It is concurred with various benefits, culminating in a push to an agenda. Decoloniality gives understanding of why modern day conflict is not taken in the harsh context in the way it should. The case of France's refusal to repay or solidify an apology for an colonial-era debt imposed on Haiti exemplifies how global systems of power manufacture moral distance from the violence they authorise. Despite clear historical injustice, a newly liberated Black nation being forced to compensate its former enslavers, international normalities and institutions allowed the theft to remain unaccounted for. This is not an isolated anomaly but a structural feature of how war, imperialism, and a personified just international order function.

Occupation brainwashes it is the more merciful option, rather than catapulting selfish prerogative. The morality of a just war collapses under the weight of the system itself, not taking into account the victims that suffer directly: noncombatants and the economically dispossessed. The ethical frameworks that claim to govern warfare often obscure more than they reveal, enabling powerful states to sidestep responsibility under the guise of proportionality, unintended harm, or necessity.

Confronting these injustices must center the voices and experiences of those harmed by war, in particular non-Western noncombatants, whose suffering is often ignored or rationalised away. This means reshaping war discourse to account for the full spectrum of harm, beyond the legal definitions of intention; calling for reparative justice, formal apologies, financial restitution, and historical reckoning. Decolonial approaches break down knowledge systems, voices, and methodologies that originate outside of dominant Western epistemologies. It challenges the canons of political science, history, and international law that often treat imperial conquest, occupation, and coercive intervention as inevitable. Elevating those approaches is the only way to fight against depraved morality, furthering broader public awareness of how these academic norms sustain an illusion of hierarchies. How military actions are framed in the context of certain nations being constantly portrayed as threats, and how old colonial voices are rebranded as humanitarianism. Media, policy debates, community attitudes and education can easily distort these views and encourage an empirical nature.

Understanding this legacy demands that global injustice cannot be normalised through legal abstraction or a sanitised version of memory. War is a mechanism of control masked as moral. To move toward genuine justice, there has to be an interrogation of the violence presented and the systems of thought and policy that allow its consequences to be quietly endured and institutionally erased.

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