

Comments on current (2022) world affairs (excerpts from letters to a friend)

10 March 2022

And the human world is more and more getting out of joint (again), with war being put high on the agenda (again). In the good old days of the ("first!") Cold War the concept "right to self-determination" used to be greatly fashionable. That changed when the US took over the world in 1990/91 and became supreme commander of rebel armies (also occasionally dubbed terrorists) wherever US "interests" were at stake (Afghanistan in the eighties was the fertile ground for a trial run). It is worth watching an interview by Amy Goodman (of DemocracyNow) with US General Wesley Clark in which he related the famous story of his visit to the Pentagon, when he was told the objective was "to take out 7 countries in 5 years: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Iran".

Whatever. I am as upset about war as you are. Every war upsets me, no matter where in the world and when in the past or present (e.g., the "civilised western world's" war against Yugoslavia, in 1999, admitted to have been illegal by our former chancellor, Mr Schroeder). War must not be the "continuation of politics with other means". Diplomacy, negotiation, balancing interests, must be the only way of settling conflicts. But what if one party to a conflict stubbornly refuses to oblige? Of course, war is the "ultima irratio", madness if you like. But wars have prehistories and contexts, they do not start out of the blue. Prehistories and contexts should be carefully studied in order to fairly put the blame on those involved. In particular, putting the blame on one person is imho always too great a simplification. For what it is worth: Hegel would certainly not agree to that kind of oversimplification. (Jokingly calling Napoleon the "world's spirit on horseback" he actually points out that the self-declared French "emperor" is an embodiment (of potentially many) of something much bigger, transcending the individual, and underlying the dialectic challenge and response dynamics of interacting and evolving societies.)

Regarding the current war in eastern Europe there is a long prehistory, and the (geopolitical) context has been the subject of numerous academic and semi-academic treatises among which Mr Brzezinski's seminal text "The Grand Chessboard" stands out. Another academic commentator is John Mearsheimer who discusses the current situation with - inter alia - Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst, on Consortium News. As to the prehistory I'd recommend watching "Ukraine on Fire" (now banned from Youtube but still available elsewhere), a documentary produced by Oliver Stone that covers a large ground, practically beginning with the end of the Austro-Hungarian empire and then focusing on the civil war that broke out in late 2013, early 2014, and that since took some 14000 lives in the two eastern break-away provinces around Donetsk and Lugansk. What struck me most when I began reading about the Ukraine-complex was the extent of Ukrainians' support of and collaboration with the Nazi invaders in 1941- 1945. They greatly contributed - of their own accord - to the Holocaust in that part of Europe. These people's descendants are just as crazy and dangerous. They had their hands strengthened in the course of the Maidan events and aftermath. They were the ones who inflicted the most pain and suffering on their fellow-countrymen in Donetsk and Lugansk (of which little was reported in our standard media because it was not considered opportune).

Much has been written and put online, about the run-up to the current tragic situation. Facts are: In late autumn last year the Russian government probed into the US-Americans' and NATO's willingness to stop luring (or goading) the Ukraine into formally joining the Alliance. It already had become clear that the Ukrainian powers-that-be (backed by the US) obviously had no intention whatsoever to comply with the so called Minsk2 agreement. In their démarche the Russians defined their lines. They wanted to negotiate (they even met their counterparts in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere - Brussels, I think) and their demands were not unreasonable and transparently laid out: non-alignment of Ukraine with either NATO or Russia, yet guaranteeing Ukraine's independence and sovereignty by all parties concerned, Donbass autonomy. These demands were pooh-poohed and dismissed.

To wit, there was even a precedent of sorts: the Cuban crisis of 1962, when the Soviet Union, responding to the deployment of US missiles in Turkey, shipped missiles with nuclear warheads to Cuba. We all remember what happened (I was fifteen at the time). Razor's edge. We do not want this to happen again.

So far, reactions in the "West" were way off the mark. Germany has finally joined the warriors - big time. Up until now there were only skirmishes (like in Mali, Kosovo, Afghanistan - bad enough). Now it's getting serious. Now they are supplying weapons to war parties ignoring past pledges, and set aside an extra 100 billion to beef up the military; German neo-nazis (of which there are and were many in our so called Bundeswehr) join the newly established Ukrainian "légion". Ugly, ugly. May they be happy with cutting all economic ties, sanctioning to their heart's content, sawing off the branch they are sitting on, boosting gas and oil prices no end. One of the ugliest reactions, however, is the dismissal of Valéry Gergiev, chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic, whose employers were probably bowing to their US masters who forbade Anna Netrebko to keep singing at the NY Met. Back to the middle ages while the language gets more and more Orwellian. It's inquisition time. ("I renounce Satan and all his work and ways, and surrender myself to You, O triune Dollar, US, NATO, and our western values, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to You until my end. Amen.") That upsets me too. Greatly. I do not succumb to pressure to conform, even at the risk of not belonging any more.

Well, I hope I did not upset you, trying to present my perspective gained from many sources that seemed sufficiently plausible. Whatever we know of the wider world, we know it through some variant of hearsay. That's what makes me deeply mistrust our media and keeps me open to changing my mind. Never trust war reporting, including photographic (that's the worst). But: there are limits to this openness to changing my mind, fundamental principles, axioms, as it were, like in mathematics. One of them is "audiatur et altera pars", well known in Roman jurisprudence.

31 March 2022

I am not surprised you are shocked by Germany's newfound warmongering. But this time we are on the side of the good guys in the trenches, aren't we?. Hurray! Jane and I are also shocked, appalled and disgusted.

I am attaching an e-version (pdf) of Brzezinski's ominous "Grand Chess-

board", subtitled "American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives". I think it is an interesting read. To get the gist of it scanning the Conclusion chapter probably suffices. It is strangely abstract as there is practically no mention in it of real human beings. There are nations, states, countries, neatly distributed around the globe, with Eurasia, the biggest and most resourceful land mass, and hence the biggest and most important turf of the game. Strangely enough, in Brz's world, nations (etc.) - not people - seem to have desires, volition and interests.

I had always assumed that only people, individuals, could desire or be interested in whatever. Egon Bahr, a respected West-German politician (in the late sixties and early seventies he negotiated, as you may remember, key treaties with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and Valentin Falin who later became the Soviet ambassador to Germany) famously told a bunch of high school students: "*International politics is never about democracy or human rights. It is about the interests of states. Remember that, no matter what you are told in history class.*" Although his intention was laudable and what he said is basically correct, I think he chose the wrong word. He should have chosen "power" instead of "interests" (which is way too diplomatic a term and too fuzzy). And he should have specified what or - rather - who he means by "state".

In the same vein, Brz does not specify who is responsible for moving the pieces on his fantastic chessboard. Instead he uses a convenient but obscuring "façon de parler". Who is in power? In the old days (say a couple of hundred years ago) the answer was still relatively easy. Nowadays it has obviously become more complex as power can assume so many more shades of grey. Yet, in my humble opinion there is such a thing as a "power class" whose members (assisted by willing servants) jointly determine the fate of their societies, for better or for worse. Mostly for worse: the more those in power own or are in charge of, the more powerful they become, the more they want to control and be in charge of (aided and abetted by the big media). "The people's rule" ("democracy") has always been, and will remain, a perhaps well-intentioned illusion. A long time ago rulers legitimised their power as god-given. Then a new axiom emerged: "All state power emanates from the people" as postulated (for example) by the German constitution. Unfortunately this is wrong as "All state power emanates from the moneyed class". I guess that's the class someone like Brz really means when he talks about states, nations and countries. Shorthand for the moneyed classes (aka the 1% - or less).

The subtitle is Brz's book's leitmotif: how to preserve US primacy through control of the rest of the human world. The US has the right to do so as they are the most powerful (in several dimensions) and hence most exceptional and indispensable nation. Only they can keep the world in check (and in order!). While written in a suave and matter-of-fact style the arrogance underlying this book is breathtaking. Brz was an influential man, "security" adviser to President Carter and counselling behind the scenes as one of the top US strategists, well into Obama's tenure. He still has a strong presence on the Internet.

In his book (actually, this is only one of many he wrote) he recommends that Russia should break up into a loose confederation of a "European Russia, a Siberian Republic, and a Far Eastern Republic", assisted by America pursuing "the second imperative strand of its strategy toward Russia: namely, reinforcing the prevailing geopolitical pluralism in the post-Soviet space. Such reinforcement will serve to discourage any imperial temptations". That was written

when Yeltsin was at the helm, happily supported by US neoliberal economists, all sorts of advisers, including CIA agents with offices in the Kremlin. It was Mr Yeltsin's successor, one Vladimir Putin (hand-picked by Mr Yeltsin, as the story goes) who slowly but surely with the help of his supporters managed to thwart the US attempt on Russia's sovereignty and also curbed the influence of the so called oligarchs (post soviet) who - in cahoots with fellow oligarchs in the west - had been appropriating the spoils of the cold war.

It is equally breathtaking to see how in our days a strategy conceived almost thirty years ago (and more - a strategy which I think is insane) prevails and in fact, is gaining momentum. Consortium News is a non-"mainstream" website that is beyond reproach as far as being "pro-Russian" is concerned. Its founder, Robert Parry, was a journalist who uncovered the machinations behind the Iran-Contra scandal during the Reagan presidency and who later left the "mainstream" to become independent. The current editor of the site, one Joe Lauria, also wrote for beyond suspicion papers such as the Sunday Times, the Boston Globe and Wall Street Journal. He recently published a piece entitled "Biden Confirms Why the US Needed This War" which rather convincingly outlines the conflation of the old geostrategy and the current "geotactics" in Ukraine. (It should go without saying that facts and figures about the goings-on in Ukraine and their interpretation, published by either of the two sides in the conflict, are - as usual - propaganda sensu strictu and can safely be ignored.)

As you can imagine, I am very concerned about the double standards apparent in the "Western" reactions to the intensification of the Ukraine conflict, especially in Germany with its horrific history. Did you know that well-known German conductors (e.g. Eugen Jochum, Herbert von Karajan, Karl Böhm) who were more than Nazi sympathisers were not asked to denounce the Nazi regime after the war? Not at all. Jochum was even invited to St. Petersburg when it was still called Leningrad, the city that had been under a deadly German siege for hundreds of days, to conduct a concert enthusiastically applauded by a Russian audience. German research societies (DFG, MPG and tutti quanti) cut all ties with Russian partners. The anti-Russian hysteria in German media is deafening. If only they had been as hysterical in the past, in their response to the endless US wars of aggression that took an estimated 20 million lives since the end of WW2.

A Ukrainian flag is now waving on the tower of a nearby castle and this morning when we went to register in the local town hall we saw yellow-blue all around us. Even in shop windows. Even so called "Russlanddeutsche", ethnic Germans who had lived in Russia and other post-soviet states and been "repatriated", get the brunt of this deliberately sparked russophobia. Unlike you and me nobody seems to know any more about Babi Yar and all the other atrocities Ukrainian and German fascists jointly committed in WW2. Hypocrisy is in the air. Unreflected, blunt. In the political and media arenas name-calling has become almost the norm, nonsensical comments are being made by all and sundry. Our president (a certain Mr Steinmeier who - as foreign minister - cowardly did not prevent the 2014 Maidan putsch from happening) now tells us "Our solidarity and support, our steadfastness, even our willingness to bear with restrictions will be required for a long time to come". "Don't buy from Russians", does that ring a bell? "Freeze for freedom", as one former German president, a certain ex-DDR-pastor named Gauck, had the barefaced cheek to tell his former "subjects". Another bell ringing? Old patterns, believed to be

forgotten, are reemerging. The ugly grimace of German fascism is rising again.

Don't get me wrong. I do not condone violence, no matter who does it or is behind it, but neither do I condone one-sidedness and the deliberate abandonment of an honest and comprehensive assessment of what is happening in our world (quite independently of current events). Fortunately, there still seem to be people who do make an effort to suppress bias and prejudice, who escape indoctrination, who do dissent, who investigate in depth (!) all aspects of what is going on. But it is an endangered species, given the increasing zealousness of censorship. Belonging to that species can even be life threatening as Julian Assange's fate clearly shows (the kind of case that would have had the entire western media world up in arms had it happened to a dissident in the former Soviet Union).

Enough of that. It is too depressing. On to another topic, albeit - on closer inspection - it may be linked to the moral and intellectual decay of our societies (as also apparent in ongoing events), but in any case it is linked to Hannah Arendt: Günther Anders, HA's first husband. I am looking forward to reading two books of his that I have ordered and received, but have not yet started reading because of the rather small print. I am waiting for my new glasses to be made, which would make reading easier. The two books I have in mind are "Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen" Vol 1 and 2. French translations exist: "L'Obsolescence de l'homme, t. 1 : Sur l'âme à l'époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle" and "L'Obsolescence de l'homme, t. 2 : Sur la destruction de la vie à l'époque de la troisième révolution industrielle". A quote from Vol 1 made me curious: "The three main theses: that we are no match for the perfection of our products; that we produce more than we can visualize and take responsibility for; and that we believe, that, what we can do, are allowed to do, no: should do, no: must do - these three basic theses, in light of the environmental threats emerging over the last quarter century, have become more prevailing and urgent than they were then." I thought I found a kindred spirit as these questions have been on my mind for a long time. Of course, like many other texts, it all has to do with the rude awakening from the dreams of the Enlightenment. Anders wrote the first volume in the mid-fifties and now, almost seventy years later, it is more topical than ever. Another book that is on my list is Horkheimer's "Eclipse of Reason", first published in 1947, the year I was born.

15 May 2022

I recently came across an interview with Michael Brenner, Professor Emeritus of International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, who dares, like his colleague John Mearsheimer, to question his country's foreign policy, especially with regard to Russia and China. In that interview he talks about the consequences of deviating from the majority line. It appeared on the *scheerpost* blog under the title "American Dissent on Ukraine Is Dying in Darkness". Here is an example of the kind of piece of writing that earned him a severe beating: "On the High Risks of Cultivated Ignorance".

The ignorance he addresses may well also be related to US policy documents that clearly and unambiguously spell out the strategic goals of US foreign policy. For example: In early 1992, not long after the demise of the Soviet Union, the US DoD drafted a document entitled "Defense Planning Guidance, FY 1994-1999".

This document lists the objectives in no uncertain terms: Here is Number One:

"Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a rival that poses a threat on the territory of the former Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration... and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power... Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor."

That's it. 1992, 30 years ago! The draft was (three months) later revised, yes, but only to mitigate the wording somewhat, not in essence. Given these objectives one must admit that the US powers-that-be, regardless of who was (and is) heading the administration (it can be a buffoon or an old guy suffering from dementia or a smart, good looking slim figured Afro-American) have done a superb job. Or so at least it seems. Mr Brzezinski's treatise was but an academically more respectable wrapping of something that had for a long time been in the planning and the making. Keeping Russia down has been and is a number one goal of US foreign policy (with China now in the same bracket). The heinous machinations in the Ukraine plus NATO enlargement have been but means to advance this agenda. I don't even dare to think about the damage this agenda has the potential of inflicting on the whole of Europe. What gives the US power "elites" the right to devise and maintain such an agenda in the first place? Nothing.

Let us pray that it may not all blow up in a big fireball, as discussed in another Scheer interview: "Nuclear War with Russia? 'A Wall of Fire that Encompasses Everything Around Us at the Temperature of the Center of the Sun'". (Robert Scheer is also beyond reproach as far as russophilia or its opposite is concerned. I "met" the man for the first time in 1968/69 when I bought a small booklet entitled "How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam"; for decades he worked for the Los Angeles Times.)

Well, I guess, unfortunately you are right. Again this is an end to our peaceful world. (There have been many endings before.) Thank goodness, the worlds immediately around us (our own small worlds) are still quite peaceful, and maybe if we simply ignore (like the infamous ostrich - or "Vogel Strauss" in German) all the bad news from the rest of the world we may still live in peace.

HGS, June 2022