World Wars I and II As Key to Waking Up to Our Culture

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World Wars I and II could have taught us something that would have changed society fundamentally. Very few people then could see the big picture: the near future would see us revving up the war on nature (e.g., the Sixth Extinction). What can we learn in retrospect about the social context of the two world wars of the 20th century, and apply to today's challenges?

The recently named Anthropocene is the new geological epoch driven by humans. The concept serves as a key lesson of 20th century "progress," dating from first atomic bomb blast as kicking off the Anthropocene. But there is much more about our industrial culture to confront, if we are to step back from the ecological precipice on which we are teetering.

Perhaps it would help to re-read history and watch films about the world wars in a different light, than to mainly lament the massive loss of life and simply ponder the changed global power structure. People of the era were consumed by militarism cloaked in justice and glory, and the consumer population was just coming into its own — with innocence, faith in progress, population growth, and technological advances. What arose as evil was being countered with hope and civilization, although the Western Allies' class structure favoring the fascistic industrial elite always had its own agenda. Be that as it may, the status quo's cherished aspects for the working classes were apparently being defended — despite defeats of the Left in Germany, Spain, Greece and elsewhere — while actually doing no one any good in the long run.

Stepping back from perceiving the first half of the century's fashions and car makes, and the simpler (but very deadly) weapons, we should appreciate critically the hard-wired urbanization and mechanization of stressful modern society in the 20th century. People at that time and even today are coping with the strife and violence of the two world wars, but the larger societal context is barely questioned. Although there were clear causes and reactions that resulted in declarations of war and ensuing slaughters, it is also clear that masses of regimented, mostly educated people during wartime were entirely subject to interruptions of society's industrial processes that dominated their lives unquestioningly.

Mass dependence on machines and manufactured products such as cars, radios, and trains had been established "for good." The 20th century was also the beginning of food systems mostly based on money and the middleman rather than the small family farm. Large-scale food growing and distribution had begun, run by corporations and other businesses. At the top financial level, central bank power over society had intensified before World War I, and corporations had become "citizens" above the people. These developments assured that profitable, mass technological change, and wars good for big business would stick around and keep growing.

Overpopulation was already a reality. One of nature's safety-valves for reducing our numbers is known as war or genocide, and was aided by unprecedented, technological slaughter appearing in World War I. Very few Malthusians were about, and none of them got any press or participated in national decisions, as far as I know. World War II was more of the same, except the intensification of technology-dependence and complex systems such as air travel and military air forces added to the out-of-control killing and jockeying for supremacy.

WWII is by and large thought to be caused by Adolf Hitler, and that the task was just to fight him to the end. But he — as an emblematic ideologue or cult figure voicing the Rightists — was merely a trigger. He appealed to not only the Right in Germany but in much of the world. Hitler's territorial overreaching was when the industrialized nations swung into action against Nazi Germany. It is possible that another, similar, fascistic leader could have mounted a violent, nationalistic, racist movement elsewhere soon enough; indeed there were and still are such characters on the political landscape. What is not appreciated is that during the two World Wars, people in their war efforts were, often unknowingly, engaging mainly in the protection of their material way of life and their sense of privilege. Except, they were really working for their

rulers at the top of society's food chain, while thinking they were protecting their own freedoms and their nations. Absent the alleged freedoms and manufactured national pride, the way of life and various privileges would be almost identical with or without the the measure of freedom and pride.

Unquestioned was the people's dependence on more and more technology and the complex systems to keep turning the world's non-renewable resources into wealth — or, for the poor, bare "necessities" of modern living. It was universally assumed that workers had to organize, or (from the right-wing perspective) be better controlled, so that society could more equitably or efficiently center on the growing industrial economy. After all, with wonders such as new contraptions, mass transit, new drugs, and better sanitation, who could insist on an alternative? Anarchistic and communistic activists thought they had an alternative, but it was actually for a bigger piece of the modern pie.

When WWII was over, mainstream thinking was that progress and peace could resume again — even though the "progress" was not really progress except in terms of applied technical and scientific knowledge. Such "progress" usually lacked any good sense or forethought, as seen with nuclear weapons, the beginnings of petrochemical agriculture, and poorly planned urbanization. And the peace that was achieved after the war was, in addition to the Cold War, simply a calming down of the pressures for fascistic powers on both sides: the Western Allies, before, during and after the war, had their corporate elites firmly at the top of the pyramid — to keep manipulating people and nature.

If we as a culture were so blind in the 20th century, and if we think the only big challenge today is to prevent another world war — a possibility increasingly mentioned — it is clear we have little idea what we are doing as to our way of life, and even less of an awareness of the prerequisites for sustainability.

The war on nature has been intensifying for a few hundred years, although it has recently become obvious to a substantial number of people through global warming, the oceans' plasticization, loss of fisheries, etc. Yet, despite improved awareness since the 1960s, each decade has overall seen less harmony between modern humanity and nature. With the accelerated pace of change, on so many levels, what was previously measured in terms of decades is now perceived year to year, especially in the mounting climate system chaos. World Wars are part of the war on nature, as false values try to continue to run the whole show through a compliant mass media focusing on terrorism. Simultaneously with deteriorating ecological health and narrowing prospects for peace, basic human community and tribal connections are increasingly severed.

If these deadly trends can become widely enough admitted and countered, and positive developments can spread, the human race may achieve an historic consensus and have a chance of surviving industrialism's destruction of the climate and overcoming the toxicity and radiation of "progress"

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References and further reading:

The Anthropocene is the new geological epoch driven by humans: Dawn of the Anthropocene: five ways we know humans have triggered a new geological epoch, January 7, 2016, The Conversation

The Hitler phenomenon in human “progress” and the mass mind:

Psychic Epidemics, by Richard Reese, January 15, 2016. “Loss of instinct is largely responsible for the pathological condition of contemporary culture.” — Carl Jung