# Modernity, boredom, and war: a suggestive essay

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Abstract. The quest for perpetual peace is a modern phenomenon, associated with a progressive view of history which emerged only in the Enlightenment. In addition, boredom – a feeling of *ennui* associated with a loss of the ability to act – is a fundamental mood of the modern age. Modern societies are thus, simultaneously, becoming more peaceful and their inhabitants are becoming more bored. As a means of overcoming our boredom, we are increasingly fascinated by violence, and war is glorified as a means of restoring our ability to act. Empirical illustrations of this thesis are drawn from World War I and from the Bush administration's 'global War on Terror'.

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In *The Invention of Peace*, Michael Howard argues that the idea of perpetual peace was first introduced only in the Enlightenment.[1] While the dream of an end to all wars may be eternal, the belief in its practicability, he says, is thoroughly modern. The idea of perpetual peace is modern above all since it presupposes a progressive view of history which only appeared in the course of the eighteenth century. As assorted liberal thinkers affirmed, human beings can use science and philosophy to understand society, and once it is thoroughly understood, it can be improved – made more rational and more efficient. War, they argued, is irrational and peace is rational. Through the inexorable progress of history, perpetual peace will eventually happen.

Howard, however, rejects the possibility of perpetual peace. His grounds, most would agree, are surprising. As he puts it: 'bourgeois society is boring'.[2] The

[1] Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 1–2.
[2] Howard, *Invention of Peace*, p. 112. Cf. Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

explanation of why boredom leads to war is essentially anthropological. Life in bourgeois society, Howard explains, is necessarily frustrating, at least to some of its members:

There is something about rational order that will always leave some people, especially the energetic young, deeply and perhaps rightly dissatisfied [...] Militant nationalist movements or conspiratorial radical ones provide excellent outlets for boredom. In combination, their attraction can prove irresistible.[3]

Everyday humdrum existence, Howard suggests, is not good enough for the 'energetic young'. Bourgeois life fails to grab and hold their attention; they are turned off and they tune out. In short, they are bored.[4] It is this boredom which war relieves. Since society causes boredom, and war relieves it, wars will continue to take place.

Interestingly, boredom, like peace, is often said to be a modern invention.[5] People in modern society are bored in a way that people in previous times and places were not. We expect to be engaged and entertained, and when these expectations are disappointed, boredom overcomes us. There is situation-specific boredom – brought on by long meetings, lectures, or waits in train stations – but there is also boredom understood as an existential condition: as a fundamental disengagement of the soul.[6] And these feelings are very widely shared. While previous societies had their bored noblemen and courtiers, in today's society boredom has been universalised and democratised. Boredom is the modern *Grundstimmung* – the 'fundamental mood' of our age.[7]

The juxtaposition of peace and boredom provides an unexpected perspective on modern society, unexpected, at least, as far as students of international politics are concerned. Most accounts of modernity familiar to these scholars are political in nature – they deal with the rise of the nation-state and the implications for warfare; or they are socio-economic – referring, say, to the connection between capitalism and imperialism. Boredom, however, is a socio-cultural factor, best characterised as a 'mood,' and while many would agree that moods are important to a study of politics, it is far from clear how to incorporate them into an analysis.[8]

There is, we will argue, an intrinsic relationship between modernity and boredom, and in conjunction the two give rise to a particular attitude to questions of war and peace. The idea of perpetual peace is modern since it presupposes a progressive view of society which only appeared some 250 years ago. This progressive view is the official, liberal, account of modern society; it is the story of ever-increasing GDPs and the gradual spread of democracy and peace. There is, however, another account, an unofficial story, as it were, told not by political leaders or academics, but instead by many ordinary people. This is the story of boredom. Although boredom has many causes, they all refer to a lack of agency.

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[3] Howard, *Invention of Peace*, p. 112.
[4] C.f The dictionary definitions in Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 13.
[5] Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).
[6] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Boredom*, pp. 41–5; Spacks, *Boredom*, p. 5.
[7] Heidegger quoted in Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, p. 305.
[8] Robert Dallek, 'National Mood and American Foreign Policy: A Suggestive Essay', *American Quarterly*, 34:4 (1982), pp. 339–61; Wendy M. Rahn, Brian Kroeger and Cynthia M Kite, 'A Framework for the Study of Public Mood', *Political Psychology*, 17:1 (1996), pp. 29–58.

Boredom is the consequence of a form of enforced powerlessness; a powerlessness bereft of religious or cultural meta-narratives, which makes a mockery of the modern 'expectation of the optimum utilization of capacities'.[9] 'The world may be man-made', the unofficial story tells us, 'but not by people like us'. What we have are thus two radically different accounts of modern society. A liberal, progressive, account which sees society as becoming ever more rational, efficient and peaceful, and a revisionist account, sceptical of liberalism and progress, which sees improvements as accidental and wars as an ever-present threat. Accompanying these stories are two different accounts of modern men and women. In the liberal story, we are cheerfully active, the enthusiastic makers of our own destinies. In the sceptical account, by contrast, we are passive and easily bored. For people who are bored, violence and war hold a particular attraction. War becomes, for some, an antidote to the tediousness of daily life. While the reality of war next to always is entirely different from people's expectations of it, the anticipation of war harbours the dream of the restoration of meaningful agency.

In this article, we elaborate on, and assess, these two accounts through an investigation of the outbreak of World War I and the European reactions to its aftermath. We also look, briefly, at the role of boredom and war in the so-called 'global War on Terror' of the last decade. Our suggestion is that the two accounts can, and must be, combined. Modern society is simultaneously conducive to peace and to the ever-increasing temptations of violence. There is a fundamental tension at the heart of modernity: as peace spreads, people are becoming ever more fascinated with warfare.[10]

### Defining boredom

Boredom has both a sociological and a philosophical dimension. It refers at once to the 'experience of subjective crisis' and to 'an empirically conditioned social phenomenon.'[11] By psychologists, boredom has been understood as 'an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity'.[12] By sociologists, it has been defined as the 'emotional apprehension of meaninglessness. [. . .] When meaning is absent, boredom arises and leads the individual towards the construction of meaning', be it in private expressions, in interpersonal or communal relationships, or in violence.[13]

Thus defined, boredom shares a family resemblance with sociological categories like 'alienation' and 'anomie'. This is unsurprising given that all three have been

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[9] Saul Bellow quoted in Teresa Belton and Esther Priyadharshini, 'Boredom and Schooling: A Cross-Disciplinary Exploration,' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 37:4 (2007), p. 584.

[10] The story of modernity, Durkheim argued, is a story of 'a morbid disturbance accompanying the whole march of civilization'. Emile Durkheim quoted in Stephen R. Marks, 'Durkheim's Theory of Anomie', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 80:2 (1974), p. 345.

[11] Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, p. 5.

[12] Stephen J. Vodanovich, 'Psychometric Measures of Boredom: A Review of the Literature', *Journal of Psychology*, 137:6 (2003), p. 369.

[13] As educational researchers have discovered, boredom is also positively related to artistic and intellectual creativity. Cf. Belton and Priyadharshini, 'Boredom and Schooling'; Jack M. Barbalet, 'Boredom and Social Meaning', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 50:4 (1999), p. 637.

advanced as valid, albeit diffuse, meta-descriptions of aspects of modernity. Modern society, in contrast to traditional societies, is anomic, that is, without norms; modern, capitalist, modes of production are alienating; boredom characterises the modern way of experiencing oneself and one's environment.[14] At the same time, anomie, alienation and boredom can be analytically distinguished, and thereby related to one another. Boredom can for example be understood as one specific form of alienation: it is the estrangement of oneself from one's sense of self.[15] When one is bored, one perceives one's agency as meaningless. Moreover, this feeling can occur to the most powerless labourer as well as to the most powerful CEO. Boredom is for that reason more than, and different from, powerlessness.[16] It is not so much the inability to get things done, or the lack of efficient causal agency, as the experience that what one gets done is without much import. Boredom is the experience of meaningless agency. Sometimes powerlessness will coincide with it, but at other times it will not.

Boredom is also not the same as anomie. First, one can be bored in a society replete with social norms, especially when those norms are seen as lacking in transcendental meaning. That is, our boredom may stem directly from a sudden awareness of the futility of society's petty rules and principles. Secondly, while both can be associated with acts of aggression, anomie and boredom relate to violence in quite different ways. Anomic violence is illegitimate violence by definition. Robert Merton defined it as 'the use of conventionally proscribed but frequently effective means of attaining at least the simulacrum of culturally defined success – wealth, power and the like'.[17] Anomic violence results from a dissatisfaction with one's position within the existing social order, not with the value-system of the order as such. By contrast, the violence which boredom incites is not necessarily illegitimate. Anomic and bored violence both aim at re-establishing a sense of agency, but the agency envisioned is fundamentally different in the two cases.[18] A bored person may, vicariously, restore his or her agency by playing a violent computer game, or, in person, by joining an army and going to war. Neither reaction is illegal. And yet, violence spurred by boredom is more radical, since it contains the hope that in war, not only the bored agent, but also society as such, will transcend themselves.

Boredom, furthermore, is an affective state; it is an emotion.[19] Politically speaking, emotions matter only to the extent that they are shared by a sufficient

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[14] On 'anomie', see Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1951); on 'alienation', see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1848* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961); on 'boredom', see Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*.

[15] Melvin Seeman, 'On the Meaning of Alienation', *American Sociological Review*, 24:6 (1959), p. 789.

[16] Seeman, 'Alienation'. Seeman lists five (non-additive) dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement.

[17] Robert Merton, 'Social Structure and Anomie', *American Sociological Review*, 3:5 (1938), p. 678.

[18] The affective nature of boredom also sets it firmly apart from the Mertonian concept of anomie, which refers to a cognitively rational adaptation, sometimes through violence, to an objective sociological condition. In Merton's account, anomie 'has no feeling to it'. Boredom does.

[19] Current scholarship in international relations pays increasing attention to the role of emotions. See, *inter alia*, Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008), pp. 115–35.; Neta Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships', *International Security*, 24:4 (2000), pp. 116–56; Jonathan Mercer, 'Rationality and Psychology in World Politics', *International Organization*, 59 (2005), pp. 77–106; Jonathan Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', *International Organization*, 64:1 (2010), pp. 1–31.

number of people. Emotions matter, that is, when they aggregate into a 'public mood.' Public moods can be defined as 'diffuse affective states, having distinct positive and negative components, that citizens experience because of their membership in a particular community'.[20] As such, moods are socially and historically situated; they are facts about society rather than about individuals; moods are brought on by cultural triggers and not by the quirks of personal biographies. Notice, though, that for a mood to be public, it need not be shared by all members of the community, only by a sufficient number of them. In addition, a 'particular community' need not be a 'national community', and a public mood not the same as a 'national mood'.[21] Moods can travel across boundaries. Modernity is a transnational condition and boredom is for that reason a transnational mood.

However, unlike individual emotions, public moods cannot be studied with recourse to a hard science such as neurobiology.[22] Public moods do not register as chemical reactions in individual brains. Rather, they have to be studied with the help of a range of sources, from visual art and poetry to diaries, literature and speculative philosophy. These can be interpreted as expressive, and co-constitutive, of the reigning public mood, in spite of being performed or penned down by individuals. Obviously, one person writing about boredom is no evidence of boredom as a public mood. To be indicative, articulations of boredom have to be sufficiently widespread. To some this may sound like a not-quite-good-enough solution to a methodological conundrum, and admittedly, these intangible sources will yield few statistically valid measurements. On the other hand, interpretive methods provide abundant access to precisely those features of society 'that remain elusive'.[23] As such, they are true to the fundamental nature of emotions and moods. Moods might be vague and diffuse, but this does not make them less real nor less important.

## Modernity, agency and peace

All comprehensive peace proposals – from Abbé de Saint-Pierre onward – have originated with thinkers who take a progressive view of human history. Society, as they see it, is moving, inexorably, from darkness to light or from ignorance to maturity. Things were bad, but they are steadily getting better, and the future will be better still. War is a case in point. In ancient times wars were unbelievably cruel, yet in modern society – at least among civilised enemies – wars are governed by legal provisions.[24] 'At the present day', William James wrote in 1906, 'the military instincts and ideals are as strong as ever, but they are confronted by reflective criticisms which sorely curb their ancient freedom'.

It would seem that common sense and reason ought to find a way to reach agreement in every conflict of honest interests. I myself think it our bounden duty to believe in such international rationality as possible.[25]

[20] Rahn et al., 'A Framework', pp. 31–2.
[21] Dallek, 'National Mood and American Foreign Policy'.
[22] Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs'.
[23] Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Fear No More', p. 134.
[24] Henry Sumner Maine, *International Law: A Series of Lectures Delivered Before the University of Cambridge, 1887* (New York: Holt, 1888), p. 8.
[25] William James, 'The Moral Equivalent of War', *Wikisource* speech given at Stanford, {http://en. wikisource.org/wiki/The_Moral_Equivalent_of_War} (1906).

Jeremy Bentham's *A Plan for a Universal and Perpetual Peace* in 1789, provides an example of a comprehensive peace project – although he admits that his scheme suffers from an 'apparent impracticality'.[26] Bentham advocated strict limits on the size of armies and the resolution of conflicts through international courts of arbitration. As he saw it, the gradual spread of rationality was bound to make war increasingly redundant. More than anything wars are 'destructive of opulence': 'All trade is in its essence advantageous – even to the party to whom it is least so. All war is in its essence ruinous'.[27] In fact, if statesmen only considered their situation carefully they would find that there are no nations that are likely to invade them.[28] The only legitimate causes of war which Bentham acknowledges pertain to colonies: in the contemporary world, states are more than anything likely to fight over overseas possessions. Yet the rationale behind colonies, Bentham argued, is itself flawed – colonies are a mercantilist mistake.

Six years later, in his essay, 'Perpetual Peace', Immanuel Kant provided another plan for a peace project.[29] Kant agreed with Bentham that it is in people's common interest to seek peace. After all, people banded together for common protection when they initially formed the state, and the same logic will now make them form a multinational peace federation. However, Kant was only prepared to admit 'republican' states into the scheme. It is only where people have a say in the making of foreign policy that we can be sure that states act based on reason and not passions or whims. In the *ancien régime*, by contrast,

the head of state is not a fellow citizen, but the owner of the state, and a war will not force him to make the slightest sacrifice so far as his banquets, hunts, pleasure palaces and court festivals are concerned. He can thus decide on war, without any significant reason, as a kind of amusement.[30]

In the olden days, that is, wars often occurred since kings were bored, but in the modern era such wars are increasingly unlikely. Only modern times have republican states, and only modern times have fully rational citizens who can conclude a final peace settlement. The Enlightenment has created a new kind of person, a mature individual who is able to take full responsibility for his actions.[31] In addition, Kant explains, peace is modern since it only is in modern times that wars have become sufficiently destructive. The more terrible wars are, the more people will come to see that they must be abolished.

To both Bentham and Kant it is obvious that society is a human creation and that human beings as a result are in a unique position to understand it. This privileged access provides us with the knowledge we need in order to make and remake society in accordance with our wishes. There is a particular anthropology at work here, rooted in the outlook of the new middle classes of the late eighteenth century. Bentham and Kant are defending a 'can-do' spirit which contrasts sharply

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[26] Jeremy Bentham, 'A Plan for a Universal and Perpetual Peace [1789]', in John Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Volume 2* (London: W. Trait, 1843), pp. 546–60.

[27] Bentham, 'A Plan', p. 552.

[28] Ibid., p. 551.

[29] Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace [1795]', available at: {http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm}.

[30] Kant, 'Perpetual Peace'.

[31] Immanuel Kant, [1784], 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment', *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983).

with the decadent ways of the upper-classes of the *anciens régimes*.[32] While kings may have gone to war to alleviate them of their boredom, citizens would never act that way. In fact, people in modern society are never bored since they, ceaselessly, are engaged in a long range of different activities. Bentham had a naive faith in the ability of people to cheerfully go on striving for their goals.[33] 'Filling one's life with harmoniously progressive activities', as Kant put it in his *Anthropology*, 'is the only certain means of becoming happy with one's life and at the same time feeling satisfactorily experienced'.[34] And endless activity, in turn, is what propels history forward. The progress of history spreads enlightenment and assures the advance of reason and, ultimately, of perpetual peace.

## Modernity, boredom and war

There was obviously something wrong with these analyses. In Europe, the twenty-five years after the publication of the two proposals was a time not of peace but of 'absolute war'.[35] And although the Congress of Vienna, 1815, inaugurated an era of more pacific inter-European relations, the solution was based on balances of power and not on idealistic schemes. In addition, Bentham and Kant's anthropological assumptions held up badly. The inhabitants of modern society seemed to be far less rational than they had assumed and far less capable of independent action.

There are two main stories to be told about the nineteenth century. The first is the official, optimistic, account regarding steady economic and political progress and an increasing technical mastery of nature. This story describes nineteenth century society from a macro-perspective, and it features wealthy industrialists, colonial officers, ingenious engineers and Suffragettes and union members marching for their rights. But then there is the other, the unofficial story, as told by many of the ordinary people who actually lived through the period. Theirs, largely, is a story of dislocation and loss. Their story was eventually picked up and shared by writers and intellectuals, and given articulate expression in terms such as 'alienation' and 'boredom'.[36]

The deep and rapid social and economic changes that took place in the course of the nineteenth century provide the background for both accounts. The commercialisation of agriculture and industrialisation forced people to move to the cities. And while the official story tells of higher wages and better living standards, the unofficial story discusses the spread of a new sense of alienation. With urbanisation, the old village-based communities disappeared: thrown into vast,

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[32] Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, pp. 90–2.

[33] John Stuart Mill, 'Bentham' in *Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical, and Historical. Reprinted Chiefly from the Edinburgh and Westminster Reviews, Volume 1* (London: J. W. Parker, 1859), pp. 330–92.

[34] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View [1798]* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 135.

[35] Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds), *Carl von Clausewitz on War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 579.

[36] On the conservative and romantic reaction against the progressive account of history, see, Albert O. Hirschman, 'Rival Interpretations of Market Society', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 20:4 (1982), pp. 1463–84.

impersonal, metropolises, the former villagers often lost their bearings. At the same time, life in the city was far more regimented than life in the countryside. People lived by the clock, and time belonged not to them, but to their employers. As a result, life was more controlled and less spontaneous.[37] Rapid technological changes added to this feeling of malaise. In a few decades there were suddenly railways, telegraphs, electric lighting, phonographs and motorcars.[38] The pace of life was speeded up, distances were reduced, space and time were synchronised and homogenised. The official story heralds these as the 'great inventions of the Victorian era', but to many people the pace of change was simply too quick. The very perimeters of social life were shifting and the traditions of the past no longer provided guidance for the future.

Meanwhile Enlightenment scepticism – the very reason whose final self-realisation Kant had looked forward to – turned out to have a corrosive impact on social life. As many contemporary observers complained, the spirit of modern society was too critical. Religion was in retreat, both as a moral system and as a system of beliefs, and, eventually, according to Nietzsche's pronouncement in 1882, God just died.[39] If there was no God, everything would surely be permitted? Yet this new permissiveness was not experienced as a new sense of freedom but often instead as a new kind of meaninglessness. No one knew where to turn for guidance.

Taken together these changes resulted in a widespread loss of the ability to act. People's options were constrained, their actions monitored and their careers blocked. Nowhere in Europe did workers and peasants participate in the political system, and even members of the industrial and commercial classes were often politically marginalised. The result of this enforced inactivity was 'an epidemic of *ennui*', of boredom.[40] '*Ennui* is the sentiment', wrote Émile Tardieu, a French doctor, 'that shows the absurdity of the fate given us in a world where we are thrown without receiving sufficient explanations'.[41] While in the *anciens régimes*, for a nobleman, boredom had been a marker of social distinction, in the modern age, it was a problem and an embarrassment.

Clearly people react in different ways to experiences of boredom. Some are overcome by despair, others by lethargy; some hope, against hope, for a revival of their spirits. Very commonly, however, boredom makes us dream dreams of transgression. To transgress, from the Latin *transgressus*, literally refers to the act of 'passing to the other side' or 'going beyond or overstepping some boundary or limit'. It is by transgressing, in this etymological sense, that we escape from our present condition. Yet most transgressions take place vicariously; they happen, as it were, in the third rather than in the first person. It is media – newspapers, books,

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[37] E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capatalism', *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), pp. 56–97; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

[38] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization and Perception of Time and Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[39] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* [1872] (New York: Vintage, 1974), sections 108, 125 and 343.

[40] Walter Benjamin quoted in Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, p. 2. The word 'boredom' first came into use in mid-nineteenth century. Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, 1852, is the first recorded instance. See, Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, p. 107.

[41] Tardieu in Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, p. 64.

film, radio and TV – which make vicarious transgressions possible. Media mediate between one world and another; between the world where we live and another world which these media allow us to imagine. By engaging with a mediatised account, we are taken out of ourselves and allowed to experience things as though we were someone else.

The nineteenth century made it increasingly possible for people to dream such transgressive dreams. For one thing, literacy increased dramatically with the establishment of systems of compulsory public education – in Germany in 1871, England 1880, France 1882.[42] The introduction of new printing technologies, and mass produced paper, made newspapers and books dramatically cheaper, and the abolition of taxes – such as the repeal of stamp duties in Britain in 1855 – meant that printed matter could be distributed more cheaply.[43] The result was the appearance from the middle of the century onward of cheap novels and newspapers – so called 'penny dreadfuls' – intended for the common man. And as for common man, and common woman too, rising prosperity gave them more time off from work and hence more time to fill with alternative activities. Much of the time they were reading – escaping their boredom through mediatised dreams.

## Peace and boredom in 1913

In the official account of the nineteenth century – in the story of continuous progress – this malaise never registered, or it showed up only as a pathology to which members of the medical professions had to attend.[44] If you subscribe to a progressive view of society, agency is never a problem. In fact, throughout the nineteenth century, thanks to the reformist zeal of Bentham and Kant, the cause of peace was celebrating a number of successes. A peace movement was growing in strength across the world, supported by rich industrialists like Andrew Carnegie, George Cadbury and Alfred Nobel, and a number of peace congresses were convened and international conventions – at Geneva, the Hague – ratified.[45]

As Norman Angell pointed out in *The Great Illusion*, 1913, this was a good time to finally rid the world of war.[46] Wars, he argued, echoing Bentham, could still happen, but 'even when completely victorious', war is 'useless as a means of securing those moral or material ends which represent the needs of modern civilized peoples'.[47] Just as for Bentham, Angell's primary rationale was economic. 'It is impossible', he says, 'for one nation to seize by force the wealth or trade of another'. In modern society, the sources of wealth are largely intangible; it is a

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[42] In Prussia in 1860, 100 per cent of school age children attended school. Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), p. 71.

[43] Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 63–5.

[44] Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, pp. 129–40.

[45] Sandi E. Cooper, 'Pacifism in France, 1888–1914: International Peace as a Human Right', *French Historical Studies*, 17:2 (1991), pp. 359–86; David S. Patterson, 'Andrew Carnegie's Quest for World Peace', *Proceedings of the American Philosohical Society*, 114:5 (1970), pp. 371–83.

[46] Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: a Study of the Military Power to National Advantage* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913). This was an 'expanded' version of *Europe's Optical Illusion*, originally published in 1909.

[47] Angell, *Great Illusion*, p. v.

matter of business confidence, of commercial credit and contacts. If these foundations of the market are tampered with 'the credit-dependent wealth is undermined, and its collapse involves that of the conqueror'.[48]

Compare the conclusions reached by Agathon in *Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui*, 1913.[49] Agathon was the *nom de plume* shared by two authors, Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde, both staunchly pro-Catholic, anti-Dreyfusards, and active in support of various nationalist causes. Their book was an attempt, using the new method of public opinion surveys, to investigate the mood among young people in contemporary France.[50] What they found was very encouraging to them. A generational shift had taken place. For much of the nineteenth century young people had indeed been listless and lacking in direction, but now things were rapidly improving. The new generation is not sitting around philosophising, they concluded, instead they want 'to get things done'. 'To tell the truth, they are not asking too many questions, their vitality is in the action, that's all'.[51] One thing the younger generation is eager to do, is to go to war. Students in our best high schools insist that they find war to be an 'aesthetic idea of energy and power'; they believe 'France needs heroism in order to live'.[52] 'Better a war', the students argue, 'than this perpetual wait'.[53] A war is above all an opportunity to express the most noble of human virtues: 'energy, mastery, sacrifice to a cause which goes beyond our individual selves'.[54]

A similar sense of *ennui* seems to have overcome contemporary Americans, and to them too, war appeared as an attractive option. This, at least, was the argument of William James in a lecture – 'The Moral Equivalent of War' – given at Stanford University in 1906.[55] 'War', he said, 'is the romance of history', and everyone feels the attraction of the military character. Military life makes us hard, and protects us against our 'weaker and more cowardly self'.[56] Above all, war forces us to rise above our private circumstances and to associate with the life of our communities. Much as he admired the military ideal, however, James declared his abhorrence of war. His solution was to establish a peace corps – charged with various worthwhile social tasks – which could instil military values in the population without the accompanying horrors of actual warfare.

In the end, of course, the world opted not for the moral equivalent of war but instead for the real thing. In retrospect, Agathon was in far better touch with the spirit of the times than Angell. War, when it was declared in July 1914, was

[48] Angell, *Great Illusion*, p. x. On contemporary critics of Angell's theses, see, Howard Weinroth, 'Norman Angell and the Great Illusion: An Episode in pre-1914 Pacifism', *The Historical Journal*, 17:3 (1974), pp. 551–74, quote p. 566.
[49] Agathon, *Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Plon, 1913).
[50] There is disagreement among French historians about how representative or biased Agathon's sample was. Compare Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Retrouver La Guerre* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2003); Rémy Cazals, '1914–1918: oser penser, oser écrire', *Génèse*, 46 (2002), pp. 26–43.
[51] Agathon, *Les jeunes gens*, p. 18.
[52] Ibid., p. 31.
[53] Ibid., p. 25.
[54] Ibid., p. 32.
[55] James, 'Moral Equivalent'. Cf. Nancy L. Rosenblum, 'Romantic Militarism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43:2 (1982), pp. 249–68.
[56] Dallek quotes American clergymen who in the 1890s argued that the US needed to 'expand to purify itself internally'. As he adds, however, 'between 1900 and 1903, traditional anti-colonialism regained the dominant position in the US'. Dallek, 'National Mood and American Foreign Policy', p. 346.

enthusiastically received all over Europe.[57] Great demonstrations took place in support of the military effort and young men hurried to sign up to go to the front. 'The trumpet call to a great world war', said the German politician Johannes Becker, meant that people no longer had to sit 'rotting at their desks'.[58] 'Today's man', wrote the Hungarian author Dezsö Kosztolányi, has 'grown up in a hothouse, pale and sipping tea', but now he 'greets this healthy brutality enthusiastically. Let the storm come and sweep out our salons.'.[59] 'This is not a war against an external enemy,' the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc insisted, 'it is a *European civil war*, a war against the inner invisible enemy of the European spirit'.[60]

Not everyone went enthusiastically.[61] Members of the professional army went because it was their job, and a majority of civilians enrolled mainly since other civilians were enrolling. However, all across Europe enthusiasm for war was palpable and widespread.[62] The young recruits wanted to be part of a great historical event. They looked forward to adventures, they wanted their resolve and their courage to be tested; they hoped for glory, or at least for a glorious death.[63] What they expected, in short, was everything the nineteenth century, in its drawn-out tedium, had denied them. War was going to empower them; restore a sense of agency to their limbs and lives.

This imagined war, to be sure, was not a war anyone had personally experienced. In fact, very few of the soldiers in 1914 had personal memories of warfare. Instead the war they went off to fight was a war they repeatedly had imagined in their transgressive fantasies.[64] The young men[65] wanted to be like the dashing heroes in the trashy novels by George Alfred Henry and Henry Rider Haggard; they wanted to recreate Tennyson's high-minded Arthurian poems; they modelled themselves on Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and on Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*.[66] A large number of the English recruits interpreted the war in terms of William Morris' medievalist drama, *The Well at the World's End*, or John Bunyan's Christian allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, a work they all had read in school.[67] Both texts were constantly referred to, in letters and diaries, by the men at the front, and they helped them make sense of the senselessness they experienced.[68]

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[57] The most comprehensive account is Roland N. Stromberg, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982). See also, Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I, To Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 103–62.

[58] Quoted in Strachan, First World War, pp. 131–2.

[59] Ibid., p. 138.

[60] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 94.

[61] Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to a Modern War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 44–54.

[62] Stefan Zweig, [1943], *The World of Yesterday* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 223–4.

[63] Hynes, *Soldier's Tale*, pp. 48–9.

[64] Ibid., pp. 47–8.

[65] It is unclear if women entertained the same fantasies or if they dreamt the same dreams. In *Dans La Guerre*, a historical novel dealing with the participation of French villagers in the First World War, women are depicted as (initially) supportive of the war, but they do not seem to have had the desire to translate this support in active military involvement. Their duties lay at the home front. Like politics, boredom apparently democratizes in stages. Cf. Alice Ferney, *Dans la guerre* (Paris: Editions J'ai lu, 2006).

[66] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 21–2.

[67] Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, pp. 135–44.

[68] Ibid., pp. 137, 139.

*The Great War as a missed opportunity*

In the end, the experiences of the soldiers of the Great War were nothing like they had expected. Modern trench warfare was not heroic, it involved no personal decisions, and it restored no sense of agency. The soldiers were lambs to the slaughter, never more so than when caught in gas attacks without protective equipment.[69] The transgressive dreams, cast as romantic quests, ended up as ironic tales of the absurd.[70] Altogether some nine million people died in the war, and in 1918 all survivors felt betrayed – by their dreams and by their political leaders. The most obvious conclusion may well have been that a war of this kind never should be fought again. Indeed, the peace movement of the pre-war era soon regrouped and scored a number of notable successes.[71] In 1919, a League of Nations, a very Kantian project, was established, and in 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact – 'providing for the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy' – was signed by some 31 states.

Yet the official optimism of the pre-war years never returned. The fundamental problem was that 'the Great War' was impossible to insert into a progressive account of history. From a rational point of view, it was simply impossible to explain why the war had taken place, and soon economic hardship undermined any return to self-confidence.[72] Europe was struck by a severe post-war recession; in Austria and Germany there was hyper-inflation; in the US the stock market crashed; and in the 1930s the world was hit by the Great Depression. The post-war generation of politicians was soon discredited, and there was widespread disillusionment with all symbols of authority. To many, hedonism, if you could afford it, appeared as the only viable ideology. Life was again, just as during the Great War itself, told as an account of the absurd. Compare the work of the Surrealists, of Dada, of James Joyce and Franz Kafka. If the world really was senseless, only a senseless account of it could provide a true description.[73]

Thus, as far as Europe's malaise was concerned, the war had resolved nothing. There was still no new sense of direction and no restoration of agency.[74] What does it tell us about our existential condition, Martin Heidegger asked, 'if such an event as the World War passed us by essentially without leaving a trace?'

Is that not a sign that perhaps no event, be it ever so great, can fulfill this task if the human being has not first prepared himself to awaken?[75]

Not surprisingly Heidegger made boredom into a key concept of his philosophy.[76] For him *Langweilichkeit* was both a challenge and an opportunity. Boredom, to

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[69] Hynes, *Soldier's Tale*, pp. 56–7.

[70] Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 312.

[71] Edward Hawlett Carr, *The Twenty Year's Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Torch books, 1964).; John Mueller, 'Changing Attitudes towards War: The Impact of the First World War', *British Journal of Political Science*, 21:1 (1991), pp. 1–28.

[72] Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 8; Zweig, *World of Yesterday*, pp. 4, 24–7.

[73] Zweig, *World of Yesterday*, pp. 298–301.

[74] Europeans increasingly dreamed of the US, and of the Soviet Union, as symbols of youth and energy. On the US, See Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, pp. 267–71. On the Soviet Union, see Zweig, *World of Yesterday*, pp. 328–38.

[75] Quoted in Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, p. 310.

[76] Martin Heidegger, [1924], *The Concept of Time* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). Cf. Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, pp. 291–3.

begin with, is a problem since, when we are bored, we are living inauthentically. Bored people are always looking for distractions, for things that help them 'pass the time', and before we know it our entire lives are taken up by such time-passing. Yet boredom also presents an opportunity.[77] When properly analysed, boredom can be overcome, and we can learn to confront our existence without any comforting illusions. In this way, Heidegger believed, the experience of boredom can awaken a sense of 'mystery', an 'inner terror' which ultimately is life-affirming.[78]

It has often been remarked that the soldiers who returned from the front in 1918 were reluctant to discuss the war, even with their own families.[79] Perhaps they, together with everyone else, preferred to look forward rather than back, or perhaps there was no way of accurately conveying their wartime experiences to ordinary civilians. At any rate, it was not until ten years later that a spate of memoirs suddenly appeared, including Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1928, and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, 1929.[80] Although both books at the time were labelled as 'anti-war tracts', it was soon obvious that the war as remembered was something quite different from the war as experienced. What many ex-soldiers recalled were not the horrors of the trenches as much as the selfless sacrifices of fellow soldiers and their intense sense of camaraderie. These were admirable virtues, much in demand in the 1920s. In this way, little by little, the horrors of the Great War were ignored and warfare once again came to be romanticised. Just as in 1913, war was seen as giving 'purpose to purposeless lives'.[81] Unable to present the progressive account of history as a valid description of the era, the internationalists and the peacemakers failed. In this sense the Great War was a missed opportunity.[82]

As for Heidegger, his final solution to the problem of boredom was not all that different from James' notion of a 'moral equivalent of war'. Addressing students when accepting the rectorship at the University of Freiburg in 1933, he encouraged them to dedicate themselves to the 'common cause' shared by all Germans.[83] In 1933, as Heidegger saw it, it was the National Socialist Party which provided the best opportunity for bringing back a sense of authenticity, and agency, to national life ('the march of our people has begun into its future history'). In the end, of course, Hitler had little interest in moral equivalences and opted instead for the real thing. And Heidegger, to his credit, increasingly distanced himself from the Nazi movement after 1935.[84]

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[77] Martin Heidegger, [1929], *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, pp. 294–309.

[78] Goodstein, *Experience Without Quality*, p. 331.

[79] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring,* p. 297.

[80] Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2000); Cf. George L. Mosse, 'Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21:4 (1986), pp. 501–2.

[81] Mosse, 'Two World Wars', pp. 492–93; cf. Massis quoted in Cazals, '1914–1918', p. 34; Antoine, 'The Impact of War on French and German Political Cultures', *The Historical Journal*, 37: 1 (1994), pp. 209–17.

[82] Zweig, *World of Yesterday*, p. 298.

[83] Martin Heidegger, 'The Self Assertion of the German University and the Rectorate, 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts', *Review of Metaphysics*, 38:3 (1985).

[84] Although he appears to have remained a party member until 1945. See Thomas Sheehan, 'Heidegger and the Nazis', *The New York Review of Books*, 35:10 (16 June 1988).

Hitler's own experiences in the trenches of World War I were to have a decisive influence on his subsequent policies.[85] Apart from nine months, he spent the entire war on active duty at the front, and by all accounts he was a committed and courageous soldier. The war made him very happy. It was, he said, 'the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence'.[86] What was important was the camaraderie, the simplicity, the energy, and the larger-than-life quality of the war. What Hitler hated was everything he believed to stand in the way of such dynamism. The aim of the Nazi Party after 1933 was to replicate the ethos of the trenches on a national, indeed a pan-European, level.

### Peace and boredom in the twenty-first century

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, just as in 1913, there are two main stories told about our contemporary condition. There is the official story, not too different from Norman Angell's account, which emphasises the benefits of globalisation. Although the twentieth century constituted a terrible set-back for progressivism, we are today once again told that shared economic benefits are bringing us all closer together and that wars are, if not inconceivable, at least utterly irrational.[87] Yet there is also an unofficial story. This story, just as the one once told by Agathon *et al*., tries to pick up on the mood of ordinary people, especially the mood among the disaffected and the young. And just as in 1913, boredom features prominently in this alternative account.[88]

Take the case of a white, badly educated, lower-middle class, youth from a relatively disadvantaged area of the US – 'your average North Carolina loser'.[89] In stark contrast to the official story of the American dream, this person has few opportunities for a successful career. He is sidelined by economic development and by cultural change, often resentful and definitely bored. Or take the case of a young Muslim man living in a deprived part of an inner-city somewhere in western Europe.[90] As a second generation immigrant, he is likely to encounter racism, but also an established society which provides few opportunities for self-improvement. He too is likely to be mis-educated and under-employed. His ambitions are blocked, he feels humiliated; deprived of agency, he expresses a strong sense of resentment.

Both these youths are likely to dream dreams of transgression, and just as their counterparts in the nineteenth century, they rely on media to provide them with vicarious experiences. It is as media-consumers that they temporarily regain control over their lives. In contrast to the nineteenth century, however, television, films and computer games provide the bulk of their entertainment, and they spend much

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[85] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, pp. 306–9.
[86] Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 306.
[87] John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); John Mueller, *the Remnants of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
[88] Cf. Fukuyama, *End of History*. Fukuyama connects boredom to the end of the Cold War and the decline in martial spirits. He completely ignores the boredom brought on as a consequence of powerlessness enforced by contemporary technology and globalised capitalism.
[89] Evan Wright, *Generation Kill: The True Story of Bravo Company in Iraq – Marines Who Deal in Bullets, Bombs and Ultraviolence* (New York: Bantam Press, 2004), p. 235.
[90] Timothy Garton Ash, 'Islam in Europe', *The New York Review of Books*, 53:15 (5 October 2006).

more time watching screens than their nineteenth century counterparts did reading books. The main genre, however, is the same: romantic quests, filled with heroic accounts of violence.[91] And death really works. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, death is the final taboo, the last thing that turns us on.[92] Death, indiscriminately administered by a superhero, makes us feel good about ourselves. And the more boring our existence, the more urgent the demand for such mediatised violence. It is estimated that by the time they reach 18, an average American has seen at least 18,000 killings on television, in addition to all the killings in movies and on computer screens.[93] 'They are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer', says the American journalist Evan Wright, who studied a group of American soldiers in Iraq.

> For them, 'motherfucker' is a term of endearment. For some, slain rapper Tupac is an American patriot whose writings are better known than the speeches of Abraham Lincoln [. . .] Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and internet porn than they are with their own parents.[94]

Although mediatised violence provides a way of escaping boredom, it also, just as in 1913, helps prepare young people for the real thing.[95] Compare the way American soldiers have been recruited for the war in Iraq. The ads emphasise self-improvement and how the military can provide them opportunities that otherwise would be out of their reach. It is a matter of empowering individuals; to help them to 'be all they can be'. Or take the case of the, albeit very small, group of disaffected European Muslims who turn to terrorism. As studies have shown, terrorism is not a response to what these people believe but instead to how they feel.[96] The average radicalised European Muslim is not a theological scholar, but is far more likely, just like other young men, to be 'chasing dreams of glory'.[97] He, and occasionally she, is unemployed, with too much time on his hand, and surrounded by friends who share a sense of alienation. Much like the militarist youth in 1913, he imagines his fight as a kind of civil war. European society, but also global society and the local community, are corrupt, and there is a 'need for violent action to cleanse it'.[98] Tanked up on Internet videos of infidels being beheaded, these radicalised groups plot domestic bomb attacks or travel to the Middle East to join *Al-Qaeda*. Terror, for the perpetrator, is very empowering.

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[91] Robert Jewett and John Shelton, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004). Eva Kingsepp has analysed World War II computer games as expressions of a longing for authentic agency, in which players 'face war, struggle, death, and perhaps even temporary transcendence [. . .]'. Eva Kingsepp, 'Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality: History and Death in World War II Video Games', *Games and Culture*, 2:4 (2007), p. 367.

[92] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Boredom*, pp. 37–40.

[93] Michael Rupured, Patty Rai Smith and Sam Quick, 'Television: Friend or Foe?', *Newsletter, Research Centre for Family and Children*, 6:2 (1997).

[94] Wright, *Generation Kill*, p. 5.

[95] What is more, increasingly the US army trains for war with the use of game simulations so that the distinction between war and game becomes blurred. Games are surrogates for real wars, but real wars are increasingly waged in the mode of a game. James Der Derian, 'War as Game', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 10:1 (2003), pp. 37–48.

[96] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[97] Marc Sageman, *Radicalization of Global Islamists Terrorists* (Washington DC: US Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2007), p. 2.

[98] Scott Atran, 'Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2:5 (2008), p. 3.

Compare the war crimes committed by American soldiers. In the years following the occupation, wrongfully imprisoned Iraqis were systematically threatened with dogs, stripped and beaten, put in stress positions and subject to sleep deprivation.[99] To torture another human being is the ultimate transgressive act; torture is also the ultimate affirmation of one's agency. Suddenly you have all the power and the person subject to you has none. As Charles Granier Jr., notorious employee of the Abu Ghraib prison, put it in an email to which he attached photos of inmates beaten and bloodied beyond recognition, 'sometimes you get to do really cool stuff over here'.[100] Torture, just as terrorism, is the perfect antidote to boredom.

*War as cure*

Boredom, in Heidegger's terms, is a *Grundstimmung* of society, or what we called a 'public mood'. But what can public moods help us explain? Can they, for example, explain why states go to war or why a young man joins the army or a terrorist organisation? Neither is likely. Not even the war in 1914 is convincingly explained this way. The outbreak of World War I has attracted a tremendous amount of scholarly attention and boredom does not feature prominently among the most commonly mentioned variables.[101] What serious scholars point to are factors far more tangible, and more well-known to students of international relations. As for the decision of young people to join the army, a number of extensive surveys exist.[102] Money is an obvious motivation, prospective soldiers tell us, but so is the opportunity to get ahead and to 'better oneself'. This latter motivation, however, is rarely, if ever, explicitly connected to feelings of boredom. And yet we know that moods matter. The public mood mattered in 1913, and again in 1933.[103] Similarly, the public mood in the US after 2001 allowed a certain kind of foreign policy to unfold – a foreign policy which the public mood in Europe largely rejected.

Although never a direct cause, public moods can be understood as a contributing or permissive cause. As such they may explain why other factors – 'the real causes' – turned out to be efficacious. A public mood provides a disposition which, while never determining an outcome, nevertheless determines the range within which likely outcomes will fall. Permissive causes can never be conclusively tested for in a statistical or experimental fashion, but this does not make them unimportant. Public moods are real and they make a difference to political outcomes. But there is no reason to apologise too profusely. After all, the

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[99] Carl Levin and John McCain, *Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in US Custody* (Washington DC: Armed Services Committee of the US Senate, 2008).

[100] *New York Times*, E-mails Surface in Abuse Case' (13 January 2005).

[101] Cf. Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War, Third Edition* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007); Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005).

[102] David L. Leal, 'American Public Opinion toward the Military: Differences by Race, Gender and, Class?', *Armed Forces and Society*, 32:1 (2005), pp. 123–38; James Griffith, 'Institutional Motives for Serving in the US Army National Guard: Implications for Recruitment, Retention, and Readiness', *Armed Forces and Society*, 34:2 (2007), pp. 230–58.

[103] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 317; Dallek, 'National Mood and American Foreign Policy', p. 339.

causes of war identified within a Realist framework of analysis are permissive in exactly the same fashion. Anarchy, after all, does not cause war, it only allows some wars to happen. Indeed it should be possible to construct a structural theory of moods which mimicked the features of structural realism. Instead of an international system based on the interaction of decentralised political units, we would have an international system based on the interaction of decentralised units of meaning.

Boredom, however, is not only a causal factor, however circumscribed. An analysis of boredom is above all a way of understanding the shifting cultural significance of war in modern society. Rather than explaining why certain wars occur it helps us interpret what wars mean. It shows war as a possible solution to a deep-seated problem of modern society – war becomes a cure for a social malaise. People who need such cures, and believe in them, and the political and cultural leaders who provide them, are as intrinsic to modern society as boredom itself. Seeing our modern society in this fashion is to understand it better.

This conclusion has obvious political implications. After reviewing the situation, a proponent of the official, progressive, account of modern society would, cheerfully, set off doing something about it. Public moods, he or she would insist, are never immutable; indeed, public moods can and do change and they can be changed through political action. After all, 'the inability to act' is not a brute fact about society but it can be altered by presenting people with a wider, and increasing, range of meaningful opportunities. Suggesting such an alternative cure is what William James did in his Stanford lecture from 1906, but at the time there were many similar proposals. For people who lacked opportunities in Europe, 'the colonies' often seemed a perfect setting for re-empowering action: for some to exploit, often ruthlessly, and for others to use for good works – as missionaries or as doctors. Some called for a revolution. As revolutionaries like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and John Reed never tired of proclaiming, a revolution will not only dramatically alter the very structure of society but also provide endless excitement.[104] Others put their hope in entrepreneurial action. Entrepreneurs, Joseph Schumpeter argued, are not only able to make good money but also to define themselves as 'men of action' in a era of mediocrity.[105]

To a proponent of the sceptical account of modern society, however, such suggestions will always appear as hopelessly naïve. There is no simple, cheerful, cure for the existential hunger which torments us. Before long the same *ennui* will reassert itself and render life also in the most exotic locations and extraordinary times perfectly humdrum. As many colonial officers, and their wives, quickly discovered, life in the local club in Madras or Kyauktada was at least as tedious as life back in Old Blighty.[106] The excitement of the revolution too soon died down, and transformed itself into bureaucratic routine or capricious dictatorship – and while capricious dictatorships may be exciting in their own way, they are not

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[104] Marinetti was the person behind the 'Futurist Manifesto' (1909), available at: {http://docs.google.com/Doc?id=df8sw89w_1050399qkqgn}. Reed published *Ten Days that Shook the World in 1919*.

[105] On Schumpeter's intellectual dept to Nietzsche, see, Hugo Reinert and Erik S. Reinert, 'Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter', in Jürgen Georg Backhaus and Wolfgang Drechsler (eds), *Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): Economy and Society* (Boston: Kluwer, 2005).

[106] George Orwell, 'Burmese Days', in *Complete Novels* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 69–252.

empowering for anyone but their leaders. As for the dreams of entrepreneurial action, they were in next to all cases crushed by hyper-inflation and mass unemployment.

Ultimately nothing is ever going to plug the hole in our souls. People in modern society have no definable desire except the desire for desire, but this second-level preference is itself insatiable. Once we have tried the new thing, we will always want the new new thing. In modern society 'everything is boring'. In fact, war is becoming boring too.[107] The increasing reliance on technology has dehumanised warfare to the point where the actions which take place on the computer screens during a battle resemble less a game than the control-system of a factory. Perhaps in the end we simply have to accept that boredom has no cure, but that a bored life is not necessarily unliveable.[108] And if that fails, perhaps, with Heidegger, we will have to conclude that 'Only a God can save us'.[109]

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[107] Jesse J. Harris and David R. Segal, 'Observations from the Sinai: The Boredom Factor,' *Armed Forces and Society*, 11:2 (1985), pp. 235–48. In addition, soldiers are often unable to identify with the wars that they are waging, and recasting them as humanitarian interventions is usually not very convincing. Christopher Coker, *Waging War Without Warriors: The Changing Culture of Military Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), pp. 59–60.

[108] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Boredom*, p. 152.

[109] Martin Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel* (31 May 1976).