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Diamond, Odetta, and Obama

Human beings living in the right geography, with the right kinds of plants and animals to eat, with animals that are not too wild for domestication, become farmers, develop stable societies with surplus food stores, acquire germs from animals and from each other, diversify their social organization into specialties, forge metal, invent technologies of various kinds including writing and weapons, look past their own boundaries for trade and domination, pick up their weapons, including guns and go to war in the name of God. Such is the history of the world according to Jared Diamond.

The world is as it is for reasons that we can discover and use to make the world better. This is the narrative as I read it in Jared Diamond's book Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societiesⁱ. Reading this book through the lens of peace theory, I am looking for historical evidence. I am looking for something to help make the case that violence beyond the violence necessary to feed ourselves is not intrinsic to humanity. We can decide against war. We can invent a way of being in the world that puts violence beyond the pale of reason.

There are glimmers. Diamond describes a hunter-gatherer people in the Polynesian islands who developed a peaceful society. The Moriori people lived on a small island so they had to learn "how to get along with each other" (56). They decided against war. The problem: to keep the population small, they castrated some male infants. However, the story does not have a happy ending for the peace loving Moriori. In December, 1835, a small group of Maori people came to the island "announcing that the Moriori were now their slaves and killing those who objected" (53). The Maori people had developed settled communities and better weapons. The Moriori people decided not to resist, but to offer friendship. They were destroyed. The story has been repeated again and again in human history.

Still, human beings have the power of decision. Innovations happen, helping societies develop new crops, livestock, and technologies. The societies that are willing to adopt these innovations and improve food production flourish (154). With a complex economy come specializations—writing, politics and religion. All too often, politics decides upon conquest and religion comes along to bless it. Diamond says: "it is often government that organizes the conquest and religion that justifies it" (266).

For Diamond, both political and religious leaders are Kleptocrats. He does not make the distinction between taxes that are not voluntary and religious contributions that, at least in the present day, for the most part, are voluntary. Chieftons develop an ideology that becomes a religion. Such gives justification to the status quo and causes ordinary people to not only tolerate the political leaders but to give them taxes. Public works are “visible signs of the chief’s power” (278). The state religion often asks people to sacrifice their lives for people they do not know (278). I say: This is where citizenship becomes a kind of kinship. According to Diamond, chiefdoms probably introduced war’s fanaticism into human history. He writes: “Fanaticism in war, of the type that drove recorded Christian and Islamic conquests, was probably unknown on Earth until chiefdoms and especially states emerged within the last 6,000 years” (282). I say: This is at once the danger of civil religion and of religious doctrine that seeks to conquer the world by force.

Further when humanity develops writing, it becomes a technology that makes politics economics and conquest easier. It makes “available a range of information and human experience, extending into remote places and times” (360). In other words, writing allows us to know and to tell not only our own local histories, but the histories of other peoples and of other epochs of history. All too often that history consists of the history of conquests and the tragic demise of peace loving peoples. It tells the tale of power relationships certain societies have established over others. It chronicles exploitation and psychological as well as physical brutalization.

Today, billions of people, many living in the two-thirds world live in poverty and are working to catch up economically with the richest third of the world. Diamond writes: “Today, third world countries are doing their best to catch-up with the First World by acquiring the latter’s technological and agricultural advantages. Such spreads of technology and agriculture, arising ultimately from competition between human groups, must have happened at innumerable other times and places over the past 10,000 years” (429).

For peace theory, the questions become: How can human societies use technological and agricultural advantages to intentionally craft peaceful societies all over the globe? How can competition between human groups work toward the elimination of economic disparity and the structural violence that it breeds? What is the innovative idea that the world does not yet know that it needs, but without which it cannot progress once it becomes aware of the innovation.ⁱⁱ

The invention of the phonograph is an example of a new technology that found uses that the inventor did not intend. When Thomas Edison built the phonograph in 1877, he did not think that it would be used to record and to play music (243). He thought it would have little commercial value. It is hard to imagine the 20th century in the United States without records. Now when we walk into a music store, we do not see records anymore, or eight track tape or even cassette tapes. We buy compact discs. Some people download their music from the internet onto iPods and other technologies. Such innovations help to spread music and ideas and possibilities around the globe with no care about the borders of the nation-state. We cannot imagine the necessity such technology will create and meet. What we can try to imagine is how we may intentionally use these technologies for peaceful purposes. Thanks to such technologies, we can still hear the voice of Odetta.

Odetta

Truth is the first principle of just peace theory. We do violence to ourselves and to the world when we try to fit lives into a lie. The deceptions that lead to wars begin all too often with acquiescence to what others want us to be or to do, or to acquire. Deception is silence in the face of injustice. We turn away. We refuse to name it with its proper name. Artists help us to see the truth. The best of them live a personal integrity that gives them the courage to lead lives that we often do not understand. When the art is true the artist gives voice to the truth, expresses our pain and grief and love and wonder and whimsy and joy. A rare breed of artist gives their talents to exposing injustice. They face it. They name it. They sing, dance, act, paint, sculpt, photograph, write, blow, beat, bow, strum, pick, clap, stomp truth. The truth-telling itself is a healing. It is its own liberation. Sometimes, they pay a large price for the truth they tell. They work endless hours to achieve excellence. The landscape of arts and letters is littered with the messy lives and broken bodies and psyches of people who commit themselves to the arts. Too, too many die young. Too, too many need drugs to help them stand the artistic responsibility. Too, too many die by their own hand. Still the world needs their vision, their will, their creative power. And when one of the best dies, we are the poorer for it.

Odetta, the great blackwoman folksinger is dead. She died December 2 in New York City. Her artist heart failed. Her own will notwithstanding, she could not continue her sojourn in this earthly life to sing at the inauguration of Barack Obama. The great South African blackwoman singer and freedom fighter Miriam Makeba died November 11 in Naples. I imagine they will together sing the inauguration with heaven's best. Makeba deserves her own consideration, but at this moment let us think about Odetta and her work. Odetta's voice was a contra-alto classically trained that sang a deep brown clarity. She chose to sing folk music because it was in that music that she found her home, where she found her true self.

Her voice, rich and pure, could make music of wails, hollers, grunts, and hard exhalations meant to sound the space and the moment when the hammer, hoe, rake, pick, shovel strikes. She sang of lonely love unexpressed and self annihilating when it cannot transverse class barriers. (The Lass from the Low Country) She sang animal stories of a fox just trying to feed his family. (The Fox) She sang lullabies (All the Pretty Little Horses). She sang of unequal pay and of workers ready to leave harsh work conditions for the sake of their own pride. (Take This Hammer). Her singing was storytelling telling a range of human emotions wrought in the furnace of this world's realities.

And then there were the spirituals and the freedom songs. They tell of a powerful God who holds the whole world in His hands, and they tell of another world to live in. The history of these songs reminds us that they expressed multiple meanings, a heaven after death and another place in this present world. Some were code for getting on the Underground Railroad to freedom. When we hear them today, it is not too far a stretch to think of the words speaking a possibility for another world to live in. This world would be a new world of our own making.

Odetta's famous spiritual trilogy is "Oh Freedom", "Come Go With Me" "I'm on My Way" In "Oh Freedom", the singer declares a determination to live free, either in this life or the next. Freedom is the other world to live in. "Come Go With Me" invites others to come to a place where there is no kneeling. This could be heaven, the Free states during the anti-bellum period in the United States, or today a world made new. It could be a world of justice that we ought to create. The final song in the trilogy states that "I'm On My Way." It states that she asked others to go with her. She asked her accountant's permission. Yet, at the end of the day she is going with or without anyone else or anyone else's permission. These songs breathed steel strength into the civil rights movement. And they can breathe steel strength into a new just peace movement.

When Odetta sang Dylan, she sang some of his anti-war songs. She sang the anger in “Masters of War.” In that song Dylan writes:

And I hope that you die

And your death’ll come soon

I will follow your casket

In the pale afternoon

And I’ll watch while you’re lowered

Down to your deathbed

And I’ll stand o’er your grave

‘Til I’m sure that you’re deadⁱⁱⁱ

In “The Times They are a Changin’” we hear echoes of the teaching that the first shall be the last and the last the first. The “trails of troubles” and “road of battles” leading to “paths of victory” maps our way.

Thus, for just peace theory, Odetta’s voice was/is an important voice. She sang a determination.

Obama

November 4, 2008, the United States of America made history when it elected its first African-American president. Barack Obama walked a difficult road, but it was a “path to victory.” It was a moment when a child from a people who were the last in the world became the first, arguably the most powerful leader in the world. It was more than an American moment. It was a significant postcolonial moment. Obama is a postcolonial child. That is an essay for another day. For now, let us say that this election was an affirmation that improbable things are possible. Key concepts of his campaign were change, hope, belief. As he said in his victory speech that night, the American electorate transcended cynicism, fear and doubt and “put their hands on the arc of history and (bent) it once more toward the hope of a better day.” He gave credit to ordinary people for the victory. He was right to do this.

Unity was and remains the blazing vision that lights his way. He ended his speech with this same vision that propelled him into the national spotlight in 2004. We are the United States of America. He said:

This is our moment. This is our time: to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope; and where we are met with cynicism and doubt and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.^{iv}

Reading Jared Diamond, listening to Odetta, and hearing Barack Obama, we know that humankind has the capacity to innovate, to use those innovations beyond anything that those who created the inventions could imagine; we know that life is hard and stands over us demanding hard work and sometimes our pay is bitter and angry tears washing away our grief and weakness leaving us glistening strong determined to look destiny in the face and to volunteer for the work of achieving the impossible possibility. For most of human history, we have taken war for granted. We have shrugged our shoulders and said that it must come. To think otherwise is for dreamers, philosophers and fools.

I say that yes we can make war obsolete. We can build another world to live in, and a thousand years from now some scientific historian will find the evidence to write the narrative of how humanity became a new creation.

ⁱ Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

Despite Diamond's geographical prestidigitation, making North Africa part of Eurasia; his turning Egyptians white; and his description of San and Khoi people – a.k.a. Hottentots and Bushmen—among other things by steatopygia – accumulation of fat in the buttocks—in women, Guns, Germs, and Steel is a book worth reading. An archaeology and genealogy of the above thinking is necessary work for another day.

ⁱⁱ Diamond persuasively argues that necessity is not the mother of invention but that inventions create necessities.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/masters-war> accessed 12/22/08.

^{iv} <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/speeches/obama-victory-speech> accessed 12/22/08