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LANZA DEL VASTO'S STRUCTURAL ETHICS ON WAR AND PEACE

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Abstract: Motivated by the alarming recurrence of wars, Lanza del Vasto became Gandhi's disciple. From a social interpretation of biblical texts (Genesis 3 and 4, Apocalypse 8 and 13, Mt 5) he derived a characterization of non-violence as the conversion from not only personal negative drives, but also from the influences of negative social institutions and the entire civilization. His intellectual categories comprise an ethical conception of four essentially different models of development. This pluralism subsists inasmuch as the representatives of each model do not search the destruction or the suppression of the adversaries, but reconciliation through non-violent means.

Keywords: *personal evil, negative social institution, conversion, non-violence, models of development, conflict, reconciliation.*

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON LANZA DEL VASTO

Giuseppe Giovanni Lanza di Trabia-Branciforte was born in San Vito dei Normanni (Brindisi, southern Italy) on September 29th, 1901, from a rather high-class family. His father was originally from Sicily, his mother from Belgium and his grandmother from France. He graduated in Philosophy at Pisa University in 1928. Rejecting both Italian Fascism and any definite role in the society of his time, he accumulated experience in foot pilgrimage, humble working and private teaching while he was also a poet, painter, actor, sculptor, writer and later a musician. At this time he decided to call himself Lanza del Vasto (hereafter LdV; Vasto being the town in northern Italy where his family came from).

In the thirties, he was distressed by the feeling that a second world war was on its way. During Fascist times, and in a country where conscientious objection was still unheard-of, he wrote to his mother that if he was called up for duty he would refuse to serve, even if it meant being shot (LdV 2006, letter of July 30th 1936; LdV 1978, p. 12). His mind was overwhelmed by the following questions:

Why is mankind forever involved in wars? Why does war arise from peace as regularly as the tide from the ocean? Since men created wars, why can't they prevent them from happening? Can human beings survive without wars? (LdV 1978, p. 12) After painful meditation, he decided there was only one man in the world capable of answering these questions: Gandhi. In 1937, he went to India, as he wanted to change his lifestyle in order to "atone for Europe", (LdV 1991, II p. 285, n. 16), a society where everyone – however honest or dishonest – was partly responsible for a new disastrous world war.

By travelling to India as a humble man he acquired a deep knowledge of people's daily lives as well as their fascinating spiritual dimension. His "meeting with the truth" –Gandhi– went far beyond his expectations:

I expected a lot from my *meeting with Gandhi*, but I learned even more. My beliefs, as well as my dreams, were overcome: I saw an issue in misery, abuse, servitude, revolution and war; justice in action with a mathematical and musical precision; the unity of life in simplicity; the candour of wise men in the inside and in the outside; non-violence or the rejection of all which disturbs the harmonious order of things... (LdV 1978, p. 15).

He was Gandhi's pupil, who called him *Shantidas* (peace servant). In Gandhi he discovered such a coherent attitude that it enlightened his entire life. Gandhi's teachings made clear to LdV that war is unavoidable when people's lives are turned towards grievance and exploitation. Instead, Gandhi's life set an example of how one can overcome evil by harmoniously bringing together the spiritual with the social. The everyday life in Gandhi's community proved that a social group could live in peace, even if its members did not share religious beliefs, ethnic origins, ancient cultures or the burdens of survival. His book on the Indian experience shows that war is very unlikely when life is led in peace and justice (LdV 1942, chp. 4). He conceived Gandhian non-violence as a novelty of a huge social and historical impact. Later, he wrote:

When we speak of non-violence as a development of this century, we should straighten out that it is not the emergence of a new spiritual value, nor is it a religious concept, but a revolutionary and innovative social power becoming part of history. The two major findings in this century are non-violence and the atomic bomb (LdV 1959, p. 293).

This experience led him to a total conversion, in body – he was forced to adapt to material conditions in India – and soul – he converted to the basics of Christian faith by re-discovering love, even for the enemy. At the time he wrote that non-violence “in its positive sense, is a Christian virtue that doesn't differ much from charity” (in the Latin sense). (LdV 1942, p. 152)

During a foot pilgrimage to the sources of the Ganges River he was called to Europe to promote “a peace army”. However, after arriving in Paris, his ambitious program had to face many obstacles. WW2 had begun. As an Italian citizen inside France, he was “suspended” without further instructions from the French State. An ensuing analysis of this project led him to overcome his previous anti-militarist attitude and follow guidance derived from Gandhi's life, introducing non-violence through an alternative social structure –Gandhian community– into Western civilization, and educating people into a non-violent lifestyle, capable of bringing together a new spirituality with the struggle against major social evils through new kinds of non-violent methods (LdV 1978, pp. 19-24).

After the war and after Gandhi's death, LdV became well known in Paris for the book he wrote on his Indian experience. He also created a group of Gandhian followers. According to Gandhi's ecumenical teach-

ings, every person should delve into his own personal religious tradition. Throughout the regular meeting he held with his group, LdV re-examined the Gospel, which he considered to be in full agreement with Gandhi's non-violence (LdV 1978, ch. I).

A few years later, in 1948, he started a first community of "Western Gandhians" in southern France. It was called "Community of the Ark", following the two meanings of the word "Ark"; Noah's Ark, built in order to save a number of human beings and animals from the scourges caused by modern civilization; and the Ark of the new alliance between God and mankind through non-violence. He established communities in Belgium, Italy, Spain, Argentina and Canada. The French community promoted several non-violent national campaigns: against the French war in Algeria, against nuclear bombs and nuclear plants, for the acknowledgement of French conscientious objectors and against the expropriation of Larzac's plateau by the Army. He died in a Spanish Community of the Ark (La Longuera, Murcia), January 5th, 1981.

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

After experiencing life in a Gandhian community for ten years, he wanted to give this project a theoretical basis, explaining negative social events –wars, for instance– by means of a causal chain, which, in the spirit of Gandhian teachings, would have its origin in personal evil. This called for a constant intertwining of spiritual and political issues, as conceived twenty years before.

War is a scourge, but not the only one. I see three others of the same magnitude, also carried out by men against men: slavery, misery and revolution. All four are linked and each functions in connection with the others. The common root should be identified and their interplay acknowledged, a task that no sociologist has ever performed, not even the greatest ones, such as Aristotle, Montesquieu or Vico." (LdV 1978, p. 24.)

In my opinion, LdV's book represents, up to date, an unparalleled effort bringing together– within the history of Western civilization– theology, anthropology, sociology, economics, politics, international relations and ethics.

Let us consider its main contents.

In agreement with Gandhi's ecumenical spirit, LdV considered the basic teachings of all great religions as the most ancient, persistent and comprehensive sources of human wisdom.

He focused on the core of all religions that believe in a creator God, which have to answer a basic problem (theodicy): Why did the benevolent God create a world (and human nature, in particular), which includes evil? This concurs with a universal problem of secular thought: how can we explain the conflict between Good and Evil throughout the history of mankind? It is also the main problem for those involved in the never-ending search for positive values, such as peace: why is there yet another war? Why doesn't peace come to us without any drawbacks?

Several great religions present stories about the fall of humanity. In both Hebrew and Christian traditions the story is the original sin (Genesis 3); in the Muslim tradition it is shorter: only one sura. (Qur'an, Sura II, 35). Gandhi also shared this religious tenet (Gandhi 1909, beginnings of ch. X). In broad terms, LdV likened this principle to the *avidya*: the ignorance of the Hindu tradition.

LdV interpreted the *Genesis*' anew. While some modern authors have suggested that the original sin was an act of disobedience that introduced worldly knowledge to men (e.g. Fromm 1984, pp. 3-8), the fall actually consists, according to LdV, in diverting human attention from direct knowledge (an original knowledge-contemplation) of the intimate nature of every being –God, men and even animals–, to a selfish knowledge-calculation aimed at the exploitation of all beings, for men's own profit. In other words, after eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, the Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil is applied by men, following their own interest and at the expense of others and Nature. Hence, goodness belongs to man's nature but doesn't come spontaneously anymore. Instead, the behaviour of human beings within the economic world is similar to that of the worst animals: "As a wolf has teeth and a snake has poison, human beings have intelligence to make war to nature and all other men" (LdV 1963, p. 141).

FROM PERSONAL EVIL TO THE FOUR SCOURGES

Chapter 4 of *Genesis* presents how evil pervaded early societies: through brothers (Cain), family (polygamy) and town (exploitation of the neighbouring countries). Maybe this text inspired LdV to illustrate the expansion of evil into higher levels of social life. He used new interpreta-

tions of both *Apocalypse* 8 (the scourges) and *Apocalypse* 13 (two Beasts dominating mankind) to depict how evil can structure social institutions.¹ Pursuant to this global analysis, original sin is not original in the sense of the beginning of times, but in the sense of the beginning of associative life.

While the above-mentioned texts belong to the Christian Bible, they describe a historical situation that every religion must consider “extreme evil” in sociological terms, that is, a society founded and structured according to evil where political power persecutes religions and oppresses populations. Such a society is presented by Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* (1909, end of ch. VI). In the 30’s, Europeans oppressed by Stalinist, Fascist, Nazi or Franco’s dictatorships, experienced similar kinds of societies. Likewise, many people experienced ruthless colonialist regimes in the past, and more recently armed groups have been ravaging the territories of Failed States.

How can humanity encompass such atrocities?

Between the natural and the super-natural, an artificial dimension is introduced by social life, made of conventions, laws and rules. After the original sin takes place, a spontaneous drive to exploit others leads the cleverest to create formal habits in order to hide their purposes. They use them to prevail upon the most naïve, as well as to build specific institutions aimed at exploitation.

This trend leads to the creation of more sophisticated social institutions which give rise to a huge amount of legal and conventional habits that every man –consciously or not– consents to, and which lead to a disguised exploitation of human environment. As a result, all men –both evil and benevolent– contribute to society’s pyramidal structure, where the weaker must bear the heaviest burden. Throughout our history, negative institutions have persisted even when they led to social scourges –Misery, Servitude, Revolution and War–, regardless of people’s will and the government’s rule.

EVIL’S SOCIAL DICTATORSHIP

These scourges have been well known since ancient times, but they are difficult to explain in more complex modern societies.

¹ This interpretation was anticipated by Johan Galtung’s suggestion to include the notion of violence into personal inter-relationships and the notion of structural violence being performed by social institutions (Galtung 1969).

In this book, LdV illustrates the expansion of evil in society down to the last detail, following the historical growth of Western civilization (his main category, as in Gandhi's thought [Gandhi 1909]). He characterized its fundamental value, which determined modern times and "modernity".

Apocalypse 13 presents an even higher evil: the evil among people. The Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil is entangled in most rational rules: the scientific ones belonging to Science and Technology (hereafter S&T), two specific social institutions in the historical development of Western civilization that are in charge of developing a universal activity: the exploitation of nature in order to discover and bring about a better future for mankind.

Owing to their great success in changing people's lives in previous centuries, S&T gained an unprecedented authority, far greater than that of any other cultural or social power. However, a more accurate analysis shows that a savage exploitation of nature and an uncontrolled increase of human supremacy were incorporated to the social system, hence, S&T development is essentially ambiguous: more medication but also more weapons, more personal benefits but also more unrestrained economic exploitation, more awareness of nature but also more pollution, etc

Some masters of non-violence (mainly, Tolstoy and Gandhi) severely criticised Western S&T. By orienting his analysis towards writings on universal wisdom, LdV lays the grounds for non-violent criticism.²

LdV hints at the existence of a correspondence between modern S&T features and several aspects of the two Beasts, as referred by the texts two millennia ago. In particular, he presents S&T as powerful as the Two Beasts, strong enough, for instance, to impress a seal on both the forehead –the intellectual world– and the right hand –interpersonal and social relationships–.

As a consequence, the present civilization is reproducing, for the first time in the history of mankind, the original sin through modern and universal S&T. Present times represent the ultimate expression of the renewal of original sin. As all Hindus, Gandhi maintained that in the everlasting coming and going of ages, present times represent "a dark age" (*Kali yuga*), whereas Muslims believe we are living Satanic times (Gandhi 1909, the end of the chp. vi).

² LdV's criticism is similar to Ellul's (Ellul 1964), which might be more impressive and efficient, but is not as well-founded.

THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING EVIL'S GROWTH

Apocalypse 13 suggests the reader should acquire wisdom to understand the nature of extreme evil. He must “count the number of the [first] Beast”, which “is a man’s name, 666”. LdV interpreted number 6 according to its meaning in common numerology: typically, the number representing man or woman. He then intended the triple 6 as a shortened formula for a mathematical series – “666...” –, which tends to infinity. This series conveys a man or a woman’s projection towards infinity, an expansion that merely takes place at a natural level –the level of the 6–, without ever reaching number 7, the symbolic number for the spiritual man or woman. In other words, the key to Western civilization is the myth of a limitless expansion of men and women’s basic capabilities at the cost of dismissing or depreciating their spiritual life.

LdV’s interpretation subdues a typical notion in modern Mathematics, which is that a series may express spiritual concepts³, in such a way that modern sciences must serve the spiritual purpose of salvation from a sin derived from S&T’s social power. This proves the superiority of spiritual wisdom on the highest intellectual structure of modern times.

Among past interpretations of *Apocalypse* 13, LdV’s analysis is essentially new since the two Beasts are no longer seen as evil personalities, but as two social institutions –S&T–, which characterize modern times. Thus, its main particularity is to be the first interpretation of a structural kind.

Although no religious authority has reinterpreted sacred texts with a view to evaluating the (negative) influence of S&T on modern life, LdV’s interpretation is enough to restore the authority of these religious texts. Therefore, faith can no longer be considered out-of-date and irrelevant to modern life, nor can personal ethical attitudes be considered old-fashioned and naïve (as Newton first suggested [Newton, 1704, Query 31]) if we consider the huge powers awarded to S&T that are indifferent to ethical rules.

³ This interpretation was inconceivable before the birth of Western mathematics. It goes along with A. Koyré’s celebrated interpretation of the birth of modern science as relying essentially on the introduction of infinity in human thought, hence, leading mankind to break the organic cycle of life, entering –as the planet Earth did in the Copernican era– into an adventure without either aim or end (Koyré 1959).

NON-VIOLENCE AS THE ANSWER TO ORIGINAL SIN AT A SOCIAL LEVEL

LdV implied that we should give an answer of structural nature to the increasing growth of evil in society. In order to direct life towards goodness, religions require a voluntary conversion from each follower in order to modify spontaneous and selfish drives, turning them into positive attitudes. At the personal and interpersonal levels, this conversion leads to non-violence, and every religion suggests that conversion from evil should take place, exclusively, along these lines.

LdV's interpretation of *Apocalypse* 8 emphasizes that conversion must be enhanced to fight and keep free (through conscientious objection, for instance) from negative institutions – even when these present themselves by means of comfortable personal interrelationships. A structural conversion, as suggested by LdV, adds a differentiation from negative social institutions to what would otherwise be an exclusively personal conversion, searching for an alliance with others to fight against structured social scourges. He who has converted from the negative aspects of civilization in the hope of building an alternative society should be ready to sacrifice his own life.

This process of conversion from social structures is in line with what Gandhi preached to Indian people, that is, an active struggle against the structure of oppression imposed by the British Empire, as well as a social effort to re-build Indian civilization through the re-foundation of its basic unit; the village, and the political agreement of a non-violent communitarian life (Gandhi 1909, chp. xiv).

Religions have asked for transcendental efforts at a personal level in the past, but this new take on structural conversion heightens the common principle of all religions: universal brotherhood, in this case transformed into an ethical program for social struggle and the creation of new social institutions. Both Gandhi and LdV stressed the ethical nature of every religion in order for human beings to be free from the evil inherent to society, and to fulfill God's kingdom within the present society. In layman terms: to accomplish a free, peaceful and fair society. This new attitude, namely non-violence, becomes a possibility –maybe the best available– for religions to surrender their aspirations of dominating other religions and instead willingly collaborate in the spirit of ecumenical reconciliation. This epoch-making transformation is in agreement with both the pluralistic attitude derived from the intuitive notion of non-vi-

olence and Gandhi's positive attitude towards all religions. It is clear that in present times religions embrace more and more this spirit of renewal, based on an ethical attitude.

In addition, LdV stressed that this new ethical approach does not require being a member of any specific religion, since it represents a pre-religious attitude. An atheist may also be engaged in it, provided that he is open –according to Galtung and MacQueen, (2008)– to sharing a wisdom that transcends material life, such as mankind's universal wisdom.

LDV'S TWO BASIC OPTIONS

Owing to space constraints I cannot comment on any more extracts (LdV, 1959) from the book, which covers a vast array of subjects –unfortunately rather briefly and sometimes inaccurately–: from the theology of the original sin to the international relationships between “the two Blocs” (USA and USSR) that dominated the world during the Cold War.

Two categories stand out in LdV's thought, even if they are merely sketched. The first one is the category of the two basic options.

The notion of global conversion represents a choice concerning the kind of development one wishes to pursue: either aiming at abstract and remote objectives (“You will become as God” is the snake's promise and the pledge of S&T) or a strenuous development of inter-personal relationships even when a distressing conflict is involved. This decision (between, according to Napoleon's dictum, two kinds of powers: the sword and the spirit [LdV, 1959, p. 314]) in the 20th century became a dichotomy including what LdV called the two greatest discoveries in the century: “Non-Violence and the Bomb”.

Another alternative may be singled out concerning the kind of organisation: either an authoritative society resulting from allowing total freedom to the cleverest, including the freedom to prevail over the rest, or a self-reliant society bringing justice for all. The two Blocs imposed a choice between their opposite ideological traditions: the liberal and the socialist, representing a society which gave almost infinite power to the few (USA) and a society organizing all aspects of human life according to justice (USSR).⁴

⁴ In retrospect, one can recognize in the “666” of Apocalypse 13 the other option too: when these three 6 are placed at the vertices of a triangle they represent the best

THE PLURALIST ETHICAL AND POLITICAL THEORY OF FOUR DEVELOPMENT MODELS

These two basic options generate a fourfold category conceived by LdV. Among the several scourges presented in *Apocalypse* 8, he considered these four: Misery, Servitude, War and Revolution (LdV 1959, p. 11). Moreover, he stated that four are the *basic needs* of men: food, a roof, clothing and utensils (LdV 1959, p. 78), and four the different approaches to play (free play, imitation, playing with formal rules, risk taking⁵) (LdV 1959, ch. 2, sect.s 3-6). In addition, LdV assigned four “historical miracles” to Gandhi (LdV 1959, ch. 5, sect. 56-62, p. 240).⁶ First and foremost, he stressed that in any society there always are “four possible kinds of sovereignty” (family or tribe, religious sect or monarchy, nation, republic or town, and party) (LdV 1959, ch. 4 sect. 60).

LdV establishes a comparison regarding the four. In the case of the four scourges he characterises Misery and Servitude as “passive” scourges, caused by the degeneration of the tension in interpersonal relationships, and war and revolution as “active” scourges, tending to a mythical social target. Here one easily recognizes the first option concerning infinity. In the case of the four sovereignties, he states that “the family [or tribe] and the nation, in their oneness, are based on the community of race and land”, whereas “the sect [or monarchy] and the party are established on a community of belief and motivation.” (LdV 1959, p. 240). Here one easily recognizes the second option concerning the kind of organization. In the light of these comparisons one can easily verify that the above correspond to the four couple of available choices within the two basic options.

“The evolution of these social structures through interaction, fracture and collision constitutes the subject of the history of civilizations... For-

possible way of organizing a closed space according to the ancient science of geometry: this represents the aspiration of men to create a selfish Paradise on Earth. It represents the evil of the second Beast, which arranges life as a dictatorship.

⁵ This classification improves the celebrated Caillois’ (Caillois 1958). In particular, LdV characterizes the play called “Ilynx” by Callois much better, and “ébrouillement” allows a comparison between the four kinds of games according to the four development models (a concept that will be explained later).

⁶ “A non-violent national liberation. A social revolution without blood. Stopping a war” (LdV 1959, p. 182). We can easily recognize a fourth historical miracle in the liberation of Indian people from passive misery in order to acquire dignity, for instance, by dressing a handmade *kadhi* (Gonsalves 2012).

tunately, there is still freedom for a man whose horizon is encircled by such structures. His wavering allows choice and liberation.” (LdV 1959, p. 240).

Given the lack of space, I am compelled to dismiss several very interesting remarks in the book. Therefore, I shall quote the following propositions only: “As there is no sea without storm, there never was a nation without war. But from the universal tide of War, successful tribes emerged here and there, protecting their freedom.” (p. 178) From his point of view the tribe is the “society that we do not refer to as perfect (no one has to bound himself to the impossible), but that we embrace and consider blessed.” (LdV 1959, p. 182) “The time has come to declare that the tribe is not necessarily primitive, savage or pagan.” (LdV 1959, p. 180.) It is the social formation of a Gandhian village, implicitly acknowledged by the Gospel’s teaching of Bliss, which according to LdV is “the charter of Western non-violence” (LdV 1959, p. 334-335).

Generally speaking, we can say that all choices surrounding these two options result in four social structures embodied in the four sovereignties. This notion corresponds to *the four development models*, brilliantly conceived by Galtung (Galtung, 1976). In my opinion, this is the basis for a non-violent political theory (Drago, 2007). In this framework, non-violence is eventually characterised in structural terms –by a self-reliant organization and a tension regarding interpersonal relationships– as the ideology of the “Green” development model, mainly implemented by Gandhi’s non-violent organisation of communitarian villages, and later by the Community of the Ark.

This socially structured notion of a non-violent ethical attitude introduces a great novelty in Western thought. It represents a departure from the monist ideologies (the “-isms”) or the bipolar ideologies (relying on a conflict –Marxism, for instance–, eventually resulting in a further monism), providing an opportunity for common agreement on a pluralist ideology. This pluralism only survives when at least one actor solves the mutual conflicts among the representatives of the four models not by the oppression or the suppression of its adversaries, but by a non-violent method leading to a common agreement.

LdV searched for an ethics on war and peace, but his conception points to an ethics of both the personal and social life.⁷

⁷ The chapter (Drago 2001) illustrates a fourfold pluralistic conception of ethics. One can perceive a general theory of ethics here (Drago 2010).

In retrospect, we see that only a radical criticism of S&T allowed LdV to leave the “weak thought” concerning war and peace behind in order to develop a complete theory of social life, including subjective, objective and structural aspects.⁸ Such is the requirement for the most important goal of our times, to talk S&T into serving a human life devoted to higher values.

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⁸ The Catholic Church –the most relevant religion– accepted Gandhi's invitation to cooperate for a better society in the Second Vatican Council. However, this Council abruptly changed its view on S&T, which was negative and later positive. This uncertainty is revealed in the case of weapons of mass destruction; solemnly condemned by the Council even if this disapproval was never applied (while LdV was fasting for 40 days in Rome in 1963; LdV 1971, pt. II, sct. 5); or in the case of the contraceptive pill, which was condemned even though people were unaware of it; or the case of (artificial) drugs, yet to be condemned for individual consumption.

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This paper was received on November 15th 2014, and was approved on January 20th 2015.