

Book Review: Ryan, Cheyney. *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*. Routledge, 2024, 212 pp.

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Pacifism, as a normative ethical position, has been theoretically developed but remains disproportionately undervalued as an ethics of peace. It is often dismissed as a naïve or idealistic ideology, a tendency that persists even within ethical and philosophical discourse. By contrast, Just War Theory (JWT) continues to be regarded as a well-established framework for making moral judgments about the legitimacy of war. Among those who defend pacifism, positions range from refined forms of contingent pacifism to more radical interpretations. Cheyney Ryan stands among the latter. *Pacifism as War Abolitionism* (2024) extends the arguments he articulated in earlier works, and the urgency of his critique of the war system could not be more relevant today.

From my perspective, the strength of Ryan's book lies in two key aspects. First, he traces the religious, literary, and political roots of pacifism both as a movement and as a moral stance. He pays particular attention to the fact that ideas and arguments for nonviolence often emerge from positions of marginality, where pacifism becomes a critique of Western modernity as a system of war. Among these sources, Ryan highlights the feminist movement (pp. 178-179) and non-European voices (p. 127). The contributions of these movements and intellectual traditions to the epistemology of nonviolence and the critique of the war system, he argues, must be integral to any plausible ethics of peace. These voices speak from lived experiences of oppression, domination, and warfare, from suffering, grief, and mourning. The epistemic value of such experience is particularly significant, as appeals to experience are often used to dismiss pacifism: those who have endured war, it is said, could never embrace a pacifist stance. Ryan, however, contends the opposite that the experience of war should compel pacifism, for war is hell – inherently brutal, dehumanizing, and devastating.

Ryan draws on a range of concrete historical examples, including the World Wars, the Cold War and its proxy conflicts, the Vietnam War, the American Civil War, and the War on Terror. He challenges the prevailing notion of World War II as a “good war,” which is often invoked as a reference point in arguments against pacifism. In addition to these historical cases, Ryan engages with literary sources, such as Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* and *Resurrection*; and examines nonviolent movements alongside abolitionist, anti-colonial, and feminist struggles. Through these examples, he builds a compelling case for pacifism and nonviolence as ethical and political imperatives.

Second, Ryan's principal claim is that ending war requires nothing less than dismantling or escaping the war system itself, and that this can only be achieved through nonviolent means. War inevitably begets more war; it will never cease without the adoption of a radical stance. As Ryan argues, it is insufficient merely to impose constraints or to devise more principled or efficient ways of waging war (p. 8). The central task, therefore, is to identify and critically examine the structures that sustain the war system,

while envisioning how these might be replaced by a system of peace. In this context, Ryan's critique of liberal democracies, their complicity in wars and their deep entanglement with militarization, exposes liberalism's failure to offer a genuinely critical response to war (pp. 135, 154). This raises a crucial question: how, then, can the war system be abolished?

The book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1, *Grand Illusions*, primarily addresses the notion of "just war" and the belief that some wars are "good" while others are "bad", which, according to Ryan, underpins the entire just war tradition. He urges readers to reject this notion and to reconceptualize pacifism by examining the central institutions that sustain war, such as states, nations, and empires (p. 7). Thus, when Ryan presents his main argument that pacifism entails the abolition of war, it is the *war system* itself that must be confronted. This system, he argues, is characterized by several interrelated features: war follows an autonomous and inexorable logic; its persistence is grounded in the institutions that build and sustain it; this logic possesses a historical dynamic of its own; and it is inherently contradictory (pp. 9-12). These features are rigorously developed throughout the book, though one might question whether a critique of war's *logic* is sufficient, particularly given its contradictory nature. Should the analysis of the war system also encompass its material dimensions, such as the military-industrial complex, political lobbying, and the ideological glorification of war through appeals to national security, threat, and risk? Nevertheless, Ryan identifies one of war's most paradoxical outcomes: the persistent belief in "a war to end all wars" (p. 28), which exposes the deepest irrationality within the logic of war itself.

In Chapter 2, *Pacifism as Tradition*, Ryan presents the plurality of voices within the pacifist tradition and explores the intersections among various social and political movements that have treated pacifism as a viable and coherent stance, such as anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and feminist pacifism. He traces the religious roots of pacifism, focusing primarily on Christian traditions (pp. 52-54). Drawing on diverse historical sources, figures, and movements that have articulated or practiced nonviolence, Ryan situates his analysis within the broader discourse of Just War Theory (JWT), engaging particularly with Michael Walzer's position and that of Walzer's revisionist critics.

In my view, Walzer's analysis of JWT possesses two notable strengths: first, his insistence that JWT principles should guide the moral and political judgments of citizens within states considering war, thereby emphasizing a profoundly democratic dimension; and second, his grounding of these principles in concrete historical examples rather than abstract philosophical constructions. While Ryan acknowledges these strengths, his central concern, at least as I understand it, lies in questioning why Walzer, given his own record of activism against the Vietnam War, did not take a pacifist position himself (p. 76).

In the following chapter, *Personal and Political Pacifism*, Ryan introduces several key distinctions within pacifist thought: between *appraising* and *opposing* concerns of pacifism, theory- and practice-based approaches, and most importantly between *personal* and *political* pacifism. Personal pacifism, as Ryan explains, condemns killing as an individual act and rejects any social practice that involves such acts (p. 84). It represents a bottom-up, interpersonal approach to nonviolence (p. 90). Political pacifism, which constitutes Ryan's principal focus, is instead defined as a critique and condemnation of social institutions and practices that enable political killing (p. 90). It thus operates as a top-down, impersonal approach aimed at confronting the structural dimensions of violence.

According to Ryan, political pacifism directly challenges the *war system* as a historically situated and institutionally structured practice. To clarify this notion, he distinguishes between *war making* and *war building*: war making refers to the acts of killing

and dying in war, whereas war building encompasses the institutions and processes that mobilize human and material resources for the purposes of war (p. 92). Ryan's primary interest lies in war building, as its analysis raises far-reaching questions about the historical emergence of capitalism and the modern state. States are identified as the central agents of war building, and while Ryan gestures toward the broader discussions of the nation-state and empire, he reserves a fuller treatment of these issues for the subsequent chapter, *The Dynamics of the War System*.

The Dynamics of War offers a historical overview of the origins and evolution of the war system within states and empires, tracing its development through successive stages: from the rise of the nation to the challenges this historical account poses for rethinking politics today. Ryan begins with the feudal background of the state, examining the transition from private to public forms of warfare (pp. 122-123). He argues that during this period, war began to assume a distinctly political function: it served to bind people together, thereby constituting collective political identities, such as the idea of "we, the people of Europe." This marks a crucial intersection between the war system and the rise of the nation and nationalism.

Ryan draws on Benedict Anderson's influential argument that the nation is defined, in part, by being "something one is willing to die for." The nation, as such, becomes a powerful ideological construct that enables states to mobilize both inclusion and exclusion (p. 147). In this context, Ryan's analysis of how other political ideologies, particularly liberalism and republicanism, become entangled with nationalist reasoning and militarized is especially compelling.

As mentioned earlier, I find this part of Ryan's analysis both particularly strong and thought-provoking. He argues that although liberalism and republicanism historically emerged as critical responses to the excesses of war (such as the religious justifications for the Crusades), both ideologies ultimately provide their own justifications for war in the name of peace. Paradoxically, liberalism "had reconciled its ideals with acceptance of militarist arrangements like conscription by accepting the claims of the nation-state as necessary to the defense of those ideals" (p. 154). Ryan's explanation implies that the ideal of the nation often serves to justify the restriction of liberal principles, including individual rights.

Put differently, as long as the ideal of the nation remains strong, practices of war making and war building tend to go unchallenged. However, when that ideal begins to erode, liberals become more inclined to question militaristic institutions. Ryan thus suggests that liberalism and even republicanism are intrinsically tied to the ideal of the nation, revealing a complex relationship between the nation-state, liberal democracy, and the notion of the people (*demos*). When the nation is perceived to be under threat, the latent nationalism within liberalism becomes militarized. Moreover, when the nation is defined not only in political terms, who is included or excluded, but also in terms of identity, values, and shared norms, perceived threats to those values once again lead to the militarization of liberalism.

The book's final chapter addresses the question of mobilization for peace. Ryan observes that the most significant efforts to address war have historically emerged only *after* major conflicts (p. 169). While this is partly true, anti-war protests also occur during ongoing wars, varying in scale and in the degree of suppression or marginalization they face. In considering strategies to engage people, Ryan distinguishes between the *idea* of war and the *experience* of war (p. 173), arguing that while the idea of war can seem exciting,

the experience of war is devastating. This distinction raises important questions about how societies remember wars.

Memories of war often carry strong nationalistic sentiments, mobilizing people against a common enemy and provoking readiness to die. These narratives can be reinforced ideologically through war museum as for example the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul or the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow. Yet memory is multidimensional: it is also preserved in veterans' testimonies, memoirs, novels, films, theater, and other forms of artistic expression that offer more nuanced perspectives on both the idea and experience of war. Svetlana Aleksijevitj provides a strikingly different view of World War II and the Great Patriotic War in her book *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, illustrating how memories of war can be preserved without glorifying violence or militarism.

Finally, my reflection on Ryan's book and the broader concept of pacifism leads me to emphasize the value of its dual character: pacifism functions both as a political movement and as a normative ethical stance. While theoretical development must continue, particularly with attention to the war system, its material foundations, and its institutions, it is crucial that such development does not depoliticize the issue. One of the central challenges, as I see it, lies in preserving this duality and fully exploring the distinctive value that pacifism offers as both a practical and theoretical approach to peace.

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