Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War by John Mueller (review)

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Technology and Culture, Volume 31, Number 1, January 1990, pp. 191-192 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.1990.0133*

Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War. By John Mueller. New York: Basic Books, 1989. Pp. vii+327; notes, appendix, bibliography, index. $20.95.

As its title indicates, this book argues that war "can become obsolescent and then die out because a lot of people come to find it obnoxious" (p. 9). John Mueller's angle of vision is primarily psychological. Human behavior, he assumes, depends on human consciousness, and consciousness defines a course of its own, affected by events and technology, perhaps, but fundamentally independent all the same. Thus, to quote again: "The elimination of major war, therefore, rests in the prospect that there will exist a 'general unwillingness' for war—that war will become obsolete, subrationally unthinkable—not that it will become physically impossible or completely extinct. Dueling is still possible, as are foot binding, bearbaiting, slavery, lynching and the Spanish Inquisition. But like these practices, war in the developed world seems now to be rejected not so much because it's a bad idea, but because it never comes up as a coherent alternative—avoided not because it's stupid, but because it's absurd, ridiculously incongruous. The idea that war is a viable, accepted, and expected way of going about things is a necessary cause of war; if that idea fades, as it has for dueling and slavery, war can't happen" (p. 242).

According to Mueller, the horror of World Wars I and II was quite sufficient to change attitudes, at least among the developed countries of the earth. Repeatedly, he goes out of his way to argue "the irrelevance of nuclear weapons and the nuclear arms 'race' to fundamental issues and perceptions of war" (p. 161). They "have changed little except our way of talking, gesturing and spending money" (p. 116).

The book begins with an overview of the way Europeans found much to admire in war before 1914 and then turns to a brisk review of international affairs since 1945. Successive chapter titles summarize his position clearly: "Korea and the Demise of Limited War," "Khrushchev and the Demise of Crisis," "Vietnam: China Abandons Cold War," and "Soviet Overreach and the Demise of the Cold War." He concludes the historical part of his book on a suitably tentative, apocalyptic note: "If the Cold War evaporates as the Soviet Union begins to act like an ordinary Great (or semi-Great) Power rather than as a carrier of a messianic universal ideology, one of the few potential causes of major war will no longer be around. It will be the end of the world as we know it" (p. 214).

A world without major war may still have problems, as Mueller makes clear in the final part of the book, which explores possible futures. If the "rising yearning for economic growth" persists in the Third World, war may disappear there too; but if Khomeni-style ideologies flourish instead, "the prospects for war will rise" (p. 256).

And even if peace should win out, international quarreling may become more rather than less shrill, since "the recent indecorous behavior of oil-producing countries against the well-armed West and of East Europeans against the wishes of their well-armed Soviet neighbor has been facilitated by the decline in the fear that big countries will use war to correct antics they find uncivil" (p. 265).

Mueller is conscious that he risks being discredited by future events. This is what happened to Norman Angell, whose book *The Great Illusion* argued convincingly that war had become obsolete in 1911. Yet, short of that sort of refutation, one can point out a serious gap in Mueller's model for human behavior. He takes no account of factors beyond and beneath consciousness. Population growth, for instance, is never mentioned; but human beings respond to growing and shrinking populations by resort to force—or, at least, have always done so in the past. Similar compulsions still prevail. After all, a major factor behind the Khomeni revolution in Iran that Mueller finds so threatening was runaway population growth and the displacement of peasants from the land that such growth invited or compelled.

It seems clear to me that human minds are not completely autonomous, as Mueller seems to suppose. Circumstances sometimes invite or compel collective illusion. And human beings live with inherited propensities for organized violence that run far deeper than our consciousness.

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In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power. By Shoshana Zuboff. New York: Basic Books, 1988. Pp. xix+468; notes, appendixes, index. $19.95 (cloth); $10.95 (paper).

In the plethora of recent computerization studies, Shoshana Zuboff's *In the Age of the Smart Machine* stands alone: ground breaking, magisterial, and synthetically brilliant. Through more than five years of semiclinical interviews, small group discussions, and participant observation, Zuboff recorded the words and feelings of workers, engineers, and managers while their companies computerized operations as diverse as paper production, phone repair scheduling, and international banking. What she heard convinced her that "the people I had been interviewing were on the edge of a historical transformation of immense proportions" (p. xiii), nothing less than the potentially disastrous collision between a two-centuries-old managerial mind-set and the new demands of the electronic data base. As her subtitle suggests, Zuboff sees corporate computerization's central issue in terms of in-house power relationships.