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Editorial

Why is the world at war

We, the editors of this **Platform**, were born while a strain of ‘world order’ was being birthed. It lasted for over seventy years but is said to be collapsing in the face of war and the talk of war. It took form in the years following World War II. Although it has shaped our lives, we were too young to understand the establishment of institutions and ideas.

However, our personal and professional lives have been preoccupied with questions about the social and political order into which we were born and have lived the biblical three score years and ten. We were trained in “social science”,¹ which, for the immediate purposes, we will define as....

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- 1 Social sciences include, but are not limited to, the following disciplines:
 - Anthropology: The study of human cultures, societies, and their development, including both physical and cultural aspects.
 - Sociology: The study of social behavior, structures, institutions, and relationships within societies.
 - Psychology: The study of the mind, behavior, and mental processes, focusing on individuals and groups.
 - Economics: The study of how resources are produced, distributed, and consumed, and how people make decisions about wealth and trade.
 - Political Science: The study of political systems, governance, international relations, power dynamics, and public policies.
 - Geography: The study of spatial relationships and the interaction between people and their environments.
 - History: The study of past events and their impact on societies and cultures.
 - Linguistics: The study of language and its role in communication and society.

A broad field of academic disciplines that study human behaviour, relationships, society, and culture. These fields use systematic methods of empirical investigation and theoretical analysis to understand how individuals, groups, institutions, and societies function and interact. The goal is to uncover patterns, explain phenomena, and provide insights into the social world – past, present and future – that can help address complex social issues and improve the quality of life.²

Although we both studied social science, we graduated as critical social scientists.

In this, we followed a host of activist-thinkers in the challenge put by Marx, known as Thesis Eleven – “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

So, instead of merely reporting on the world and its ways, as the orthodox training required, we have been interested in who made this world. And how it was that they made it? Most importantly, we have asked the cui bono question: Who benefits from ordering social/political/economic relations?

By understanding human behaviour, societal structures and who profits, the critical social sciences aim to cultivate remorseless thinking to provide tools for solving societal challenges.

The instruments and the institutions of the post-World War II period were defended to the mythological hilt by the power of money, by the purported ‘fact’ that race meant noticeable differences between humans and the idea that social change was best when it was gradual and driven by processes we could not change. These governance devices ensured order throughout the post-war years.

For critical theorists, these markers were (to use an ancient term intentionally) vainglorious and very, very violent: killing took place in the name of peace, plunder in the name of progress, and imprisonment in the name of pioussness.

They were carried within a sclerotic discourse which – circulated and recirculated – slogans of Western superiority, the triumph of capitalism, and the inevitability of democracy.

Our country, South Africa, was no exception to this: as all who read these pages will know, it was the exemplar!

2 We are grateful to Dr Henk van Rinsum of Utrecht University for providing this definition.

Why does this matter?

The war talk into which the world has stumbled frequently is underpinned by relatively shallow understandings of complex social experiences and instant attempts to prescribe solutions. Instead of critical reflection, conversations over policy occur within a form of triage – a preliminary assessment to determine the urgency of their need for treatment and setting these against the resources required.

Seven decades later, our cohort (and those that have followed) have reached what the increasingly influential scenario-building industry increasingly believes is an ‘inflection-point’.

This idea – borrowed from mathematics and often used to explain economics – suggests changing the game’s rules, forcing adaption or facing ‘the risk of falling behind’. So, inflexion is linked to the notion of ‘progress’, intrinsic to the post-World War II world.

But if something is to replace the tragedy of poverty and hunger the world is experiencing, or the wealth gap and systems which stand behind this, or the global civil war against people of colour, it is the idea that humans should live with – rather than against – the planet.

The latter is the most urgent issue facing humankind – an issue in which war and its making cannot have any role in its solution, even when it is part of the problem.

As Nils Gilman recently put the issue at the progressive Berggruen Institute’s Planetary Summit:

Recognising our planetary condition ... acknowledges a longstanding reality... Humans have always been part of the planet. We have never been masters of it. Unfortunately, post-Enlightenment epistemologies and the systems of governance derived from them have disavowed these facts for too long. The longstanding – eternal – reality is that the flourishing of human societies is impossible without the flourishing of the multifarious lifeforms of our planet.³

3 See Gardels, N. 2024. Green nationalism. *Noema*. 13 December. Available at: <https://www.noemamag.com/green-nationalism/> [accessed on 23 December 2024].

If the social science that we were taught seventy years ago and which, in turn, we researched and professed was intended to make sense – or even channel – social flows, we should call the present confusion what it is – the utter failure of social science as a project to understand the world, let alone change it!

If this is so, we should call time on it and – yes, we are afraid to say – we recommend that we all begin again!

But what might be going on is not in the direction of despair but more modestly is an understanding from Samuel Beckett's oeuvre, 'What now is must come to an end'.⁴

The three essays in this edition of Platform are, we hope, the beginning of a long and complicated conversation in these pages (and in many other places) on war, global change and the crisis of the commons.

4 Jäger M. 1978. Marcuse at 80: still firm on message of revolt. *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*. 16 July.