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THE AGE OF UNPEACE



How Connectivity Causes Conflict

THE AGE OF UNPEACE

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How Connectivity Causes Conflict

MARK LEONARD



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For Mum and Dad
For Berni and Annele
For John, Marjorie, Richard and Andrew
For Graham, Susie and Guy
For Miriam, Phiroze and Isaac
For Jakob and Noa
For Gabrielle

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INTRODUCTION:

THE CONNECTIVITY CONUNDRUM

We may be on the cusp of a new, silent pandemic. Like Covid-19, it is rampaging across the planet, spreading exponentially, exploiting the cracks in our networked world and constantly mutating to evade our defences. But unlike the virus which pits all of humanity against a disease, this new pandemic is being deliberately transmitted from human to human. It is not a biological force, but a set of toxic behaviours that are multiplying like a virus. The connections between people and countries are becoming weapons.

Just look at our response to Covid. There have not been enough vaccines, masks and gowns to go round and, rather than working together to increase global supplies, countries have used their stocks to bully others. When the virus first struck, the Chinese government hoarded medicines, masks and PPE. And when it spread, these supplies were used to bribe and to blackmail. China's allies – Brazil, Serbia, and Italy – were showered with masks and vaccines. But more critical states – like Australia, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and

the USA – faced threats to withhold supplies unless their governments changed policy.¹

These toxic connections are not just about trade. In America when the Black Lives Matter protests raged over the George Floyd murder, a wave of African social media posts called for violence against the ‘fascist police’. It looked like a global political awakening, but it was orchestrated by troll factories in Ghana and Nigeria funded by the Russian state.

Conflict over technology itself is affecting the world’s biggest companies. Google and Huawei had worked together closely for years, building a partnership between the most successful handset maker and the most widely used operating system. But when America put the Chinese handset maker on a banned list, Google banned Huawei from its Android platform, leaving millions unable to update their phones and plunging China’s tech giant into crisis.

Even states that are allies often seem to end up at loggerheads. For example, in December 2020 British supermarkets ran out of fruit and vegetables when the French government closed its borders. The ban on British lorries was ostensibly to control Covid, but it also put the squeeze on Downing Street in the Brexit endgame.

And while superpowers flex their muscles, weaker countries are making use of similar tactics to strike back. In the same year, the Iranian Navy seized oil tankers to protest against crippling sanctions, their piracy designed to break support for a financial blockade. A few months earlier, in nearby Turkey the president opened his country’s border to Greece, urging millions of Syrian refugees to seek a better life in Europe. His goal was not to help them follow their dreams but to use the threat of a wave of refugees to extort concessions from the European Union.

What do Chinese bullying, Russian trolling, American regulation, French blockades, Iranian piracy, and Turkish blackmail have in common? They were not random accidents – like an asteroid falling from

the sky or an earthquake – but new types of political violence. Each was a weapon perfectly evolved to exploit a weakness in our connected world. Each time one country uses one, another reciprocates, creating a deadly spiral of tensions. And as we get further into the twenty-first century their use is spreading to pandemic proportions.

UNWAR AND UNPEACE

This is a short book with a simple idea: that the connections that knit the world together are also driving it apart. In a world where war between nuclear powers is too dangerous even to contemplate, countries are waging conflicts by manipulating the very things that link them together.² Great power politics has become like a loveless marriage where the couple can't stand each other's company but are unable to get divorced. And as with an unhappy couple, it is the things that we shared during the good times that become the means to harm during the bad ones. In a collapsing marriage, vindictive partners will use the children, the dog and the holiday home to hurt each other. In geopolitics, it is trade, finance, the movement of people, pandemics, climate change and above all the internet that are being weaponized.³ And, as will become apparent later, it is connectivity itself that gives people the opportunity to fight, the reasons to compete, and the arsenal to deploy.

Rather than eliminating competition between countries, the deep interdependence seems to fuel it. Economic coercion is nothing new, but the hidden wiring of globalization is. And the ways that it is being manipulated give sanctions, blockades and PR campaigns a viral quality and deadliness that did not exist before our world was defined by networks. Although the journalist Thomas Friedman claimed that our globalized world is flat, it is in fact just the opposite – an uneven and mountainous network. Some countries are more central to the system

than others. They can cut rival nations off and use their control of hubs to assert their power – as America does with the dollar and its control of the internet or China with its manufacture of medical supplies and access to rare earths. But even weak countries can target the strong with the right leverage as Iran is doing by blocking shipping routes or Turkey by using refugees as pawns.

Should we think of these new conflicts as ‘connectivity wars’? Sort of, but not quite.⁴ The alternation between war and peace has shaped human history, defining the borders of our countries, and influencing the nature of our social contracts, the structure of our economies and the purpose of our politics. It has captured our imaginations and inspired some of our greatest poems and novels. However, Tolstoy would not be able to write a masterpiece like *War and Peace* if he were alive today. Nobody could, because the distinction between war and peace has broken down.

The rules of war state that it should take place between sovereign states. It should begin with a declaration and end with a peace treaty. And the combatants should be soldiers who are clearly distinguished by their uniforms.

Those kinds of conventional wars have all but disappeared. They haven’t happened in Europe or America since the Second World War. And although the wars in the Middle East and Africa are tragic, the number of people they kill is tiny in historical terms. For the last couple of decades more people have committed suicide than died in armed combat.⁵

Carl von Clausewitz famously called war the continuation of politics by other means. But in a nuclear age the price of war is unfathomable. That is why connectivity conflicts are becoming the ‘other means’ of global politics. They are less costly. They are more effective. As a result they are becoming more prevalent. And as they proliferate across the world they are killing many more people than conventional warfare.

Rather than playing out on the land, air and seas, the new struggles exist on the internet, border controls, technology, supply chains and our financial system. They have brought conflict back from the periphery of the global economy to its very core; Europe and America are just as affected as Africa or Latin America. The combatants in these struggles have changed too: in the old days only a few great powers could fight across continents but nowadays millions of people can inflict harm on one another through the internet or terrorism. The victims are civilians rather than soldiers, and they number in the millions rather than the thousands.

Because connectivity conflicts do not produce the kind of dramatic shareable video footage beloved by social media, most people think they're less lethal than conventional military conflicts. But just because we can't see body bags does not mean that these conflicts are not deadly. In fact, they've already blighted the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Sanctions, population expulsions and trade wars have been around for centuries but until the world became organized around global supply chains, internet politics and a dollarized financial system, it was hard to strangle foreign economies and societies at so little cost to oneself. Sanctions have already killed hundreds of thousands – from Venezuela and Iran to Sudan and North Korea – primarily by restricting access to food, medicines and electricity. Millions of civilians have been forced deliberately from their homes for political reasons in the last few decades, from Cuba and Kosovo to Libya and Turkey, to name just a few. Trade wars have cost tens of millions of jobs – from Russia and China to Germany and Canada – while cyber attacks have the potential to disrupt entire countries. The US Department of Homeland Security has identified sixty-five facilities in the US against which a single cyber attack would cause 'catastrophic harm' – defined as 'causing or having the likelihood to cause \$50 billion in economic damage, 2,500 fatalities,

or a severe degradation of our national security'. Some of the most insidious cyber attacks to date have been attempts to hack democratic elections (between the autumn of 2016 and the spring of 2019, there were attempts to interfere with national elections in twenty democracies representing 1.2 billion people).⁶

If we add all of these up, it's clear that the body count for connectivity wars dwarfs that of conventional wars in the twenty-first century. Over the last two decades fewer than 70,000 people a year on average have been killed in military conflicts⁷ – while millions have been harmed by connectivity wars. And it's only going to get worse.

But although connectivity conflicts are more common, more effective and more deadly than conventional wars, we don't really recognize that they are happening – and don't even have a term to describe them. As a result the conventional wisdom is that we live in a golden age of peace.

It is true that these new kinds of attack do not match the conventional definition of war. But how can we close our eyes to the tension and violence that is ripping through our world every day? Once we start to count the millions of casualties every year we can hardly describe our era as one of peace.

In fact, there is a word which starts to capture our liminal condition – suspended somehow between a state of war and one of peace. Academics such as Lucas Kello who work on cyber were looking for a term that describes the grey zone that their world was stuck in, where every day they saw millions of attacks which fell short of conventional war. They rehabilitated a beautiful Anglo-Saxon word to describe disorder on the internet: *unpeace*.⁸ And as violence spreads from the internet to trade, finance, migration and beyond, their word provides a perfect encapsulation of our condition. We are having to get used to an unstable, crisis-prone world of perpetual competition and endless attacks between competing powers. Welcome to the age of *unpeace*.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

I am maybe one of the people least well equipped to spot the fact that we live in an age of unpeace. Every aspect of my family's history and identity has been shaped by the imprint of war while my own life has been entirely defined by its absence.

My father's father was born into a modest background in late Victorian Britain. He lied about his age to fight in the First World War and his life was saved by being gassed and taken to hospital. My father was evacuated as an eight-year-old in the Second World War and was so traumatized by the experience that he became a conscientious objector rather than doing military service in the 1950s. His experiences motivated an interest in politics and as an adult he was one of a group of sixty-nine Labour MPs who defied the party whip to vote for Britain's membership of the European Community.

My mother was born in 1944 in a convent in France where her German Jewish parents were hiding. She lived in France for a few years (where her father remained) before returning to Germany in 1950. Her surviving relatives are peppered across the world. And when you bring any of them together you need to be ready for a conversation that includes at least English, French and German.

Like many in Europe I am part of the first generation in my family for 150 years not to face war, exile or even extermination. My life has been full of opportunities unimaginable for earlier generations. Having grown up in Brussels in the 1980s with a British father and a French-born German-Jewish mother, it was my European identity that brought unity and meaning to my family's fragmented history. One of the most influential people in my early life was my maternal grandmother, Gertrud Heidelberger, a Holocaust survivor who was orphaned at the age of ten. She taught herself seven European languages and even in old age

could recite the poems of Dante, Heine, Keats, and Wordsworth. I grew up learning how the different and often violent histories reflected by those national poets could be united by a common European story about the future. I believed that a sense of shared European culture and destiny was not only possible but necessary to avoid the catastrophes of the past. My work has reflected those family lessons.

In 2005 I wrote a book called *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*, a love letter to a project that had buried war, brought waves of countries out of dictatorship and into democracy and expanded the horizons of hundreds of millions of people.⁹ I have also tried to understand other world cultures to make the foreign more familiar. I spent several years studying the intellectual emancipation of China, writing a book called *What Does China Think?* which explored the big debates on capitalism, politics and globalization in this rising superpower.¹⁰ And in 2007, I set up a European think-tank with a mission to promote conflict resolution through diplomacy rather than on the battlefield.¹¹ I recruited staff from over twenty countries and established offices in seven countries, with our biggest in London. My family life, my career, and my worldview were all buoyed up by the rising tide of internationalism.

But in 2016, with Britain voting to leave the European Union and Donald Trump winning the White House, the tide went out. I felt shipwrecked, and many people, companies and families were left stranded. For me, the world's journey from nationalism to globalism – and back again – has not been an abstract matter. Why did so many people reject the forces that had made my life so much safer and more fulfilled than those of my ancestors? How could they want to go back to an earlier age that did not benefit from these human links and technological advances? If we stick with a conventional twentieth-century analysis, it's hard to understand *why* we live in a world in which scientific knowledge, connectivity, and an awareness of a shared destiny are

not enough to bring people together to solve urgent common problems. So how do we explain the last five years?

That is the question that I have asked myself every day since 2016. In my search for answers, I've drawn on political science, history, sociology, economics and psychology and talked to network scientists, artists, anthropologists, and even priests, among many others. My research has taken me from Facebook's headquarters in Silicon Valley to facial recognition labs in China; from meetings with the Turkish president in his sumptuous new palace to military installations in Hawaii. I've talked to billionaires in Davos and unemployed labourers in Brexit Britain. I've met Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Saudi princes; and exchanged ideas with some of the most active builders of the connected world, such as George Soros and Peter Thiel. I went into this process expecting to write a defence of the open world but the deeper I dug the more complex my thinking became. I started having some nagging questions. What if the process that brings us together is actually what *causes* segregation and conflict? What if the growing divisions in the globalized world are not a bug in the system but one of its intrinsic features?

OPPORTUNITY, REASONS AND WEAPONS

Globalization – that is, the connectivity of people, markets, technology and ideas – offered so much to the world. This book is about what happened when it broke its promise, and what this betrayal means for us all. The problem is simple to articulate but one that I find very difficult to accept. We can't have 'one world' because becoming more interlinked is not simply a source of understanding and togetherness. It is also the cause of ever more bitter division and conflict.¹² People have claimed for some time that connectivity can be used for good or ill. They have

maintained that interdependence does not always stop war. And some have even written about how it has been weaponized. But I have discovered something even more concerning: that it is connectivity itself that drives us apart. It gives people the *opportunity* for conflict; *reasons* to fight each other; and a lot of *weapons* with which to inflict harm.

Let's start with the *opportunity*. At the turn of the millennium, like many people I had hoped the internet and globalization would provide the impetus for a global political consciousness. Connectivity would spread global understanding. Trade would bind us all together through global supply chains, making war increasingly costly, even irrational. Science would replace emotion as the basis for decisions about the future of humanity. And law would replace war as a means of settling disputes over everything from trade and the environment to data and human rights. Governments set about ripping down walls, dissolving borders, signing trade deals, building roads, railways, pipelines, airports; and wove a world wide web that bound the entire planet. Globalization has literally strung us together: 64 million kilometres of highways; 2 million kilometres of pipelines; 1.2 million kilometres of railways; and 750,000 kilometres of undersea internet cables. By contrast, there are just 250,000 kilometres of international borders dividing us.¹³ Twenty years ago there were only 16 million people online but now it is half of humanity (and by 2022 the connected population could reach 6 billion).¹⁴ Every day almost 1.5 billion people log on to Facebook and 500 million tweets are posted on Twitter.¹⁵

In a connected world, people don't have an option to keep themselves to themselves: everyone is in each other's face. This allows nations and people to work together, to trade, to learn from each other and develop bonds of friendship. But connectivity also creates opportunities for greater competition between nations and people. As the great sociologist Anthony Giddens has pointed out, social media has made a reality of the global village, where people form personal friendships and intimate

relationships, but where we also contend with bullies, gossip, innuendo, deception and violence.¹⁶

As the world becomes ever more crowded and digitally connected, these points of contact create more potential sources of conflict, and supply more opportunities to interfere in each other's affairs. Connected networks are the transmission belts – allowing people and nations to turn our open societies against themselves. And they also allow countries to compare themselves to each other, to copy each other and in the process spiral into competition. As with so many things, the ancient Greeks understood the tension best. They had a single word for a medicine that could end up poisoning its patient, *pharmakon*. The tragedy of our generation is that the forces that have united humankind are also dividing us and threatening to destroy us. But just because connectivity creates an opportunity for conflict, it does not mean that conflict needs to happen. The root causes of tensions between countries are fear, greed, and the desire for power or status. And connectivity can enhance them all.

My second theme in the book is why connectivity gives us the *reasons* to fight. We have known for a long time that it has a dark side as well as a light one – allowing competition as well as cooperation. I have come to the conclusion that connectivity tips the scales in favour of competition by changing the way that people and countries think of their identity and interests. In this book I explore how digital connectivity is bringing out the competitive side of human nature – leading to much more polarized societies, fuelling an epidemic of envy and also taking away control.

Digital media have fragmented reality so dramatically that there is no agreement on the truth, which means that societies are not just divided by different opinions but also by different facts. It has taken me too long to understand that so many people interpreted the last few decades in a completely different way from me. In my life, the liberalization of travel

and trade and the EU's rules on free movement have only brought opportunity. I have enjoyed so many experiences in different countries, tasted new foods, been able to recruit better and more interesting staff, and could think about a career where the best jobs in the world were open to me. But to many other people in the same period, international links opened the door to the off-shoring of their jobs. They invited into the country well-qualified migrants who would work for less money, crowd their hospitals and schools, drive up house prices and introduce different languages and shops to our high streets. They provided new routes for financial crises, terrorism and pandemics to enter our communities and new standards by which to judge our response. And our culture changed so profoundly that some profess to fear becoming 'strangers in their own lands'. In other words, many of the things I saw as bringing peace and opportunity have made others feel vulnerable and poorer. Because we consumed different media and interpreted their messages in different ways we did not draw on a shared conception of reality. Happily ensconced within my own bubble, I was not confronted with the growing inequality, envy and sense of loss of control that connectivity was fuelling in parallel bubbles.

Social media have also fuelled envy on an industrial scale by opening everyone's lives up for comparison. Friedrich Nietzsche first argued that expanding travel, trade and communications in the nineteenth century created an 'age of comparison'. He could see that a new global consciousness would lead people to compare their own country's ideas, customs and culture with others' – and to reject their lot when it was lacking. But for Nietzsche the notion was abstract, a battle of ideas rather than a daily grind that relentlessly exposed the limitations of our own lives in comparison with the most privileged and successful in the world. Economists have shown how globalization fuels tensions by turbo-charging inequality and creating losers with a stake in overthrowing the system. Foreign policy experts have told us how connectivity can lead to

geopolitical tensions by changing the balance of power. Just as Germany's trade-powered rise led to tensions with the British empire, so too is China's rise creating frictions with the USA. But it is comparisons at the level of individuals which have been most dramatically altered. When I was a child we would compare our experience to our neighbours' or our parents' lives – but nowadays every aspect of our existence can be benchmarked against (sometimes fictionalized) depictions of the most privileged and successful people in the whole world. How can our lives ever match up to those standards? The result is permanent resentment.

Connectivity increasingly makes people feel the world is beyond their control. As you can imagine, in the wake of Brexit I often get mocked for my book on Europe. Many people see the title *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century* as an act of hubris. And looking back on it, the title of the book was indeed absurd. I don't regret the praise I lavished on the European ideal, but it was wrong to imply that any sole power could run a world defined by globalization. After all, the core feature of our interconnected planet is the loss of control. This is keenly felt by nations who struggle to tie down mobile capital, to regulate digital titans, to limit climate change or avoid exploitation by continental superpowers. But it is also felt by individuals in the face of unaccountable algorithms, economic and demographic change or political elites they no longer feel represent them.

I try to show how the convergence of these forces is leading to greater conflict *within* nations, driving a new politics of identity and envy that was reflected in the Brexit referendum and Trump's America. I also show how these trends are leading to more conflict *between* nations. A new tribalism and sense of victimhood has come together with a new topography of power in an age of global networks. I explore how countries as diverse as Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia and Turkey have reinvented their foreign policies to compete in the new age.

My third big theme is to explore how the ties that bind us have been

turned into *weapons*. The examples at the beginning of this chapter reveal some of the hidden wiring of our globalized world, and how it is being used to drive people apart. We can see that whoever is in power today – a Biden or a Trump, a Chinese dictator or a French democrat – will increasingly manipulate the ties of globalization to seek power for themselves and harm others.

The forces of connectivity intended to bring the world together have metamorphosed into the battlegrounds of a global tug of war. There is an economic realm defined by trade supply chains, currencies and financial systems, as well as natural resources and energy. There is a contest over global infrastructure linked to the flow of energy and data. There is a technological world where participants will fight over intellectual property and information. There will be battles over migration and refugees and the transit agreements that regulate their flow. And global institutions will continue to be a battleground rather than a check on competition. Trade wars, sanctions, cyber attacks, fake news and the expulsion of refugees have shown how leaders can manipulate these links between nations to inflict pain on others and get ahead themselves. All these points of contact between peoples form the battlegrounds for a permanent conflict that pits nation against nation.

In this new global contest countries are drawing on whatever leverage they have to hand. Russia is using gas supplies to blackmail its neighbours, and interfering in elections; Turkey is threatening to open its borders and expel refugees; Saudi Arabia is supporting paramilitary organizations and funding Wahhabi mosques in other countries; India is complaining about ‘data colonialism’ and excluding Chinese internet companies from its market. But the three biggest players are the United States, China and Europe. The USA relies on the reach of the dollar to police access to the global financial system and its control of the internet to put the planet under surveillance.

China is building roads, railways and cables, and using its enormous

cash reserves and the profits from a protected home market, to link itself to all other countries around the world on terms favourable to itself. The European Union uses the size of its market and its bureaucratic capacity to develop a rule-book for global connectivity. As we enter a period of total connectivity, the three biggest powers have different views of what is at stake. Each has different weapons, philosophies and ways of looking at the world. The shape of our global order will be defined by the battle between these three empires of connectivity.

GREAT RESET

Many of my friends think we are facing the fight of our lives, a struggle to save the open world order. Politics for them no longer split 'left' from 'right', but 'open' from 'closed'.¹⁷ The big questions are now: welcome migrants or build walls? Free trade or protectionism? Modern values or a return to tradition? Petty conflicts between party elites have been transcended by a new schism that seems to explain all divisions from the bedroom to the boardroom.

The idea of a divide between 'open' and 'closed' gives politics a grandeur and simplicity that has been absent since the end of the Cold War. Populism, economic insecurity and social media have laid the foundations for a political counter-revolution that has overturned the consensus of the last generation. The solution for some is to fight back and recover lost gains. Defeat Trump and Johnson. End austerity. Regulate Big Tech. As I write this, I have a copy of *The Economist* beside me. The cover proclaims, 'Goodbye Globalism', and asks, 'Has Covid-19 killed globalisation?' It claims 'the greatest era of world history' has been pummelled by three body blows: the financial crash of 2008; the Sino-American trade war; and Covid-19. But the article treats these three phenomena as accidents rather than a direct consequence of the global connections