

Frieder Otto Wolf

„Peace Tax“ as a direct action of liberation: how far does my responsibility extend, and what am I responsible for?

I welcome, emphatically and deliberately, the important contribution of liberation theology to this debate. Frau Fink has made me realize yet again the strength of this tradition. Alas, we do not yet have an equally clearly articulated tradition of a ‚liberation humanism‘ – which we badly need in our day. I would like to work in this direction.

1 Being responsible for one's own life

Today I will begin with a quote which in some way – a way with which some of those present here may not feel at ease – supplies a real sign of our times:

„It is easier to dedicate oneself to ideas meant to redeem the world than to take responsibility for one's own life“.
Imre Kertész, Dossier K.

My point is not what Imre Kertész wants to tell us with these words, but what we can learn from this barbed aphorism if we look more closely:

Firstly, that ideas „claiming to save the world“ fortunately do tend to overreach themselves in the context of our subject. And we should cheerfully be prepared to admit this: he who, for example, wishes to liberate the human world from future wars should not immediately make that sound as if it were „the redemption of the whole world“ – it is a necessary feature of any liberation, without peace there is no good life for us humans.

Secondly, we should join Kertész in remembering that as a rule, the point of our actions is not devotion but achieving goals. It is a beautiful thing to devote oneself and surely also good, but here we are not looking at absolutely everything in the whole world, but at a rationally definable specific action.

And, *thirdly*, that in the first instance we always have to start by proving ourselves responsible for our own lives – especially when, together with others, we strive for the preconditions of human life to be preserved, renewed or still created.

But if we have a really close look, then Kertész's words also tells us that, in the way they are put, they say too much as well as too little:

Too much, because nobody can take responsibility for the fact of being alive at all – beyond the macabre sense of not having committed suicide.

Too little, because it would be totally inadequate to limit responsibility to one's own private life or one's own immediate actions – such a retreat would become a real problem at the latest when the question arose of actions not undertaken in respect of public events, other people's actions, or the web of activities in which we are enmeshed (an attitude the democratic ancient world described as ‚idiotic‘).

2 But what does responsibility mean anyway? For what is responsibility being shouldered in the shape of the Peace Tax?

Who *can* accept responsibility before whom – and who *has* to do this, who is obliged to do this or is coerced into it? I think that in the first instance responsibility is a specific relationship between the legal subject and its actions and omissions to act, in the judgement of all those affected. As Mrs Fink has already explained – responsibility is a triple relationship in which a person stands up for something in front of some authority.

Looked upon in a totally *legalistic* manner, we will think of payment of damages or correction, in certain cases of something as complicated as ,restitution'. All this is valid only under the precondition that legally I do actually own something that I can use to express my responsibility in quite practical a way – by supplying something appropriate from that which I own. We should not primarily be thinking, in this context of property in one way or the other, but of the capability to provide something, which others (and/or I myself) attribute to myself.

But can we follow that pattern in *political* and *moral* affairs?

Here we are faced with quite a central problem of human actions: how does the demand for the taking of responsibility concern us as subjects capable of action, unwilling to allow ourselves to be reduced to mere legal subjects but who may, for example, be putting into practice the decisions of human networks or collectives – be that on the basis of voluntary co-operation or on the basis of a historically constituted enforced membership?

Let us at this point listen to our language (not just the German one, but that of the average central European, which in these questions largely coincides with ours)!

Within administrations there is responsibility within one's ,patch', there are the special areas of expertise and interest of individual authorities or of holders of certain offices – and the overall responsibility of those governing the state. Both go beyond pledging ,one's own'. We are talking about that which has been entrusted, for which responsibility is being shouldered at the request of others.

At this point a differentiation which has been transferred into modern state law from theology becomes meaningful: just as the scholastic theologians differentiated between the ,ordinary' and the ,extraordinary' power of God to act (in order to be able, for example, to define the difference between the activities of the order of creation and miracles), ever since Jean Bodin the theoreticians of the modern state have differentiated between the ,normal' activities of the power of the state which is sown and regulated by means of laws, justice and administrative offices, and the ,state of emergency of a ,highest authority of the state' which overrules all these mediators in the face of crises that endanger the existence of the state.

Here we must consider the question of the status of those who – if we think it through – in a democratic community supply the orders to this power of the state, and what results these rules and regulations bring about in respect of the responsibility which we as citizens of a state or a group of states are called upon to shoulder.

It should be clear that there is no way in which we could claim that it's not our business. Nor can we refute the fact that we still have more to take responsibility for than such an overall responsibility at times when the business of state is running normally. We, too, are called upon – faced with crises which endanger the lives of people, the protection of whose common good presents the very core of any democratic state governance – to intervene, directly and in the very long view even without regulations, as best we can.

I suggest that we look upon our position as that of explicit ,givers of orders' in democratic states (and, in all other political communities, as being expected not to resist – and thus co-bearers of responsibility) under the heading of that which is communally owned. On the one hand this enables us to continue to relate our responsibility onto ,one's own' as a presupposed resource¹

¹ At this point it is useful to remember the historical origin of that category of solidarity which resided in the French law of ,legal societies' and there originally concerned the duty of the members of such a society to fulfil justified claims made to this ,society', jointly or also, standing in for each other, by appropriate procurements.

without automatically limiting the idea of one's own to 'personal property'. On the other hand this [responsibility – translator] enables us also to tie our extraordinary responsibility, in situations of crisis, back to the concrete conditions in which we live, socially or ecologically.

This 'joint ownership' is rooted in communal practice, not in concepts of identities or legal titles that have acquired an independent life. It is not as citizens (or members of a people) that we have the duty – in our highest authority of being the givers of orders – of having to ensure that a truly human life is possible in our community. In normal times of a peaceful democratic self-governing community² (2) this will require no more than some critical checking and supervision. At times of crisis, however, we are duty bound ourselves to find forms which enable us to take direct and immediate action to ward off the crisis.

There is no doubt that in general, we have to accept such a responsibility even as mere contemporaries of a historical process, contemporaries who in a given historical situation which they did not bring about themselves are under the obligation of becoming capable of action. The excuse that something isn't one's own business lacks the power of argument, and remembering the limit of one's own power of action only gives one the duty to employ the limited resources which are at our disposal, in the best possible way and to strengthen them by networks of solidarity. All this is valid even more in situations of major historical crises.

In the current historical situation since the end of the 1990s, wars and the leading of wars are increasingly again being propagated as a tool of politics, and they are becoming endemic at the fringes of state and legal orderings. Since September 2001 we have a worldwide, declared but not really closely defined state of war in the shape of the war against terror. Thus a historical state of emergency has been reached in which direct actions of citizens against this state of war are becoming a duty. Peace

Tax is a form of action that offers a concrete chance for fulfilling this political and moral obligation.

3 Facing counter-arguments: the lack of responsibility of corporate social responsibility is no safe counter-model

Anybody who today goes online with a search engine, seeking its interpretation of 'responsibility' in the language of that medium, will immediately be inundated with a multitude of examples for a sign of our times; under the slogan 'corporate social responsibility – i.e. the 'social responsibility of enterprises whose constitution defines them as societies' [in German, 'Gesellschaft' can mean 'society' in the all-embracing sense as well as a commercial company – translator] – two things are exercised:

firstly, quite aggressively and explicitly, there are reports about all the good things the company in question does and causes to be done, concerning its own staff, society worldwide, and the environment; but secondly, tacitly and between the lines, the opinion is put forward that the responsibility of these companies is really quite limited: on the one hand it does not even touch upon the indirect and long-term effects – like smoking a lot, or waging wars with weapons that have been supplied – that can be blamed on the irresponsible and wrong actions of others; on the other hand, even within the range of responsibility which has been basically admitted by the company, it is limited strictly to the headrooms granted by the factual coercions allowed it in whatever situation by global competition. For even companies must be allowed to claim the

With the rise of the working class as a movement in the 19th century this legal category was then translated into a political demand which was suited to concretize the demand for 'fraternity', which had remained somewhat vague, within the central political postulates of the French revolution – as a tool, e.g. a strike, as well as a goal.

² *However, we will always have to accept responsibility for the checking for the actual presence of such normality.*

premise generally valid, that legally as well as politically and morally, *„de impossibilibus nemo obligatur“*: nobody can be obliged to do the impossible.

This rather more concealed aspect of the concept of corporate social responsibility seems to be eminently suitable for rejecting any postulated responsibility for peace – and with thus drawing the rug from under the thought of an obligation for peace tax and even the claim of its moral and political permissibility. But it only looks like that. For this aspect of the concept of corporate social responsibility is based on an argument that is no more than a sly trick. This trick consists of the assumption, based on absolutely nothing, that the conditions employed in arguments of what we are not responsible for, and thus the freedom of responsibility of the company, firstly have been understood correctly and secondly are incapable of being altered by any human course of action in such a way that such lacunae of responsibility could be avoided.

Even without the radical question as to whether there is no alternative to the form of an exchange of goods based on purchase and sale, or the capitalistic competition of private companies – something that cannot, at a fundamental level, be seriously denied, is the fact that even if we presuppose such fundamental economical conditions, it is quite apparent that neither the application of the law according to which the producer is responsible for the goods made, nor the further development of ‚global business regulation‘, which is valid in nearly all markets, could be denied by referring to such simplified facts of life: thus, for a long time already, we have had a liability of the cigarette industry develop in respect of cancer-causing smoking: it can no longer use as an excuse that it’s the smokers themselves who light their cigarettes; also, it is only in the totally unregulated areas of criminal trade that everything the competition does by the sheer fact of being done should exercise an irrefutable coercion on the competitors.

Instead of claiming that it is none of their business, companies that want to put forward a concept of corporate social responsibility that can really be taken seriously should – whenever they come up against such limitations of their primary and immediate responsibility, accept responsibility for changing these very limitations and conditions in the laws of liability or in their global business regulation, if they already have developed one, in such a way that they themselves are enabled to act in a less limited, responsible manner.

It is undeniable that companies as legal entities with a limited brief and often also with limited liability do not think that they owe the extraordinary duties to direct action which are valid for us as citizens or even simply as human beings. But of course this is not valid for those people who bear responsibility within these organizations, who therefore constantly have to face their comprehensive responsibilities.

More recently a most remarkable twisting of these considerations has been popularized: within the framework of the neo-liberal strategy of an all-embracing deregulation of market mechanisms, under the slogan of ‚responsibility for oneself‘, the opinion has been propagated that the poor and the unemployed are, in the long run, always themselves to blame for their situation. In the face of real trends, caused by changes in the structure of society, towards a galloping polarization of conditions of employment and income, this is quite blatantly absurd: it transforms the often merely miniscule and personally unattributable ‚own share‘ of the fact that this trend hit a given person, into a complete reason for the effected outcome, thus replacing the necessary analysis of complex and graded conditions of reciprocal effects and responsibility with a short-circuited list of accusations which it is only possible to make appear plausible by enlisting widespread prejudices, which are then followed by appropriate sanctions, incentives and penalties. However, we all know that in the face of such factually limited scope for action, no

threat or even implementation of such a coercion for action will be effective – but only a thorough improvement of the conditions under which the action is supposed to take place: a clearly aimed empowerment, a strengthening of the ability to act of the subjects which are supposed to be enlisted and activated in whatever situation.

However, one thing, only misused by these neo-liberalistic so-called arguments in order to make legitimate sanctions against those who appear to be unwilling, is correct: our responsibility reaches further than does our fault.

Even where we cannot be accused of failure for which we deserve blame – be it in actions or omissions – in our primary and immediate realm of responsibility, we have to face our responsibility. The excuse of having been forced into some action may be valid in the context of legal textbooks, but it does not help us get rid of our – appropriately graded – usually only indirect responsibility for the conditions of our actions.

And in crisis situations, in which the existence of the whole human context is endangered, this danger challenges us to direct and unmediated actions, in order to meet our responsibility as human beings. The way in which Peace Tax works basically falls into this category, fulfilling – faced with extraordinary crisis situations – the transfer from individual actions to direct action by means of a reshaping of the conditions that mould our action.

4 Limiting or concretizing responsibility“

It is probably an irrefutable fact that, if everybody were always immediately responsible for everything, without particular competencies or gradations, this would have a downright paralyzing effect. Such an inflation of responsibility might also lead to a taking over of responsibilities that remained a mere figure of rhetoric, not leading to any practical consequences. For if the acceptance of responsibility simply means confessing to one's actions (in the sense of: 'it's we who ...') then it has lost its specific practical value.

A differentiated idea of the responsibility that has to be taken, in concrete terms, may be gained by the investigation of the connection of responsibility and the possibilities for decisions. This will take us further than an over-hasty fixation on questions of the effective power to act – for it is not so much the immediately available options of action that have already decided who has to take responsibility for what, but above all the possibilities to take appropriate strategic decisions. Thus strategies of explaining actual problems as well as problems of the subjective options for action by given subjects may well achieve a widening of the field for which responsibility could be accepted in quite a practical manner. If we judge our own possibilities for action in cold blood, that does not mean that we accept them. Rather, if we consider the matter closely, we are always obliged to fight for the extension of our possibilities for action, as well as to work on the improvement of our own capability to act.

The concept of Peace Tax stands in the context of such a strategy of enlightenment: by exemplary action in a pointed, radical form a motif is to be created which others can follow in their minds, with the aim of making the extent of the factually existing problems that peace faces more obvious, and at the same time striving for ideas for a framework for unfolding one's own meaningful actions against the current crisis of global peace.

Thus it becomes possible to concretize responsibility without reducing or even minimizing it. For in this manner the important question as to how far our responsibility reaches in any one concrete case, will find graded, strategic answers which fulfil a meaningful gradation of responsibility related to reality, without us having to put up with the question as to how these graded limits of

our responsibility might look in any one concrete case – and that means, without removing us from our effective overall responsibility.

With such a strategy of concretizing responsibility – always with the question in mind: what can I do/what can I do together with others? – we can do justice to our responsibility, which in principle knows no limits at all, but without settling down in our comfortable status quo.

5 Radical or unlimited responsibility without a ,higher authority’?

The philosopher Hans Jonas, whose bent is more on the conservative side, founded the ,principle of responsibility’, thinking primarily of the global ecological crisis which, since the 1970s, has been endangering the actual political ecology of humankind. Such a principle of responsibility is still valid – faced by the potential for destruction of high-tech wars – when confronted by the continuing tendency towards war, in spite of the ending of the Cold War, which for all practical purposes was WWII, even though it turned out to be possible to avoid its military execution at least in the centres of the superpowers who had been confronting each other. Since the war against terrorism has been declared, by the one remaining superpower, to be worldwide, long-lasting and at the same time unlimited, we are placed in a worldwide crisis of peace. Part of this are the inextricably entwined topics of the refusal of the recognized nuclear powers to disarm, and the nuclear proliferation of ever new and potentially also ever more belligerent regional major powers. Indeed, the threat to human survival, as the arms race of the Cold War brought with it, has changed its face. In this it probably has also become somewhat less acute: I would remind you only of the Cuban crisis which with hindsight shows us more and more clearly how close it brought our world to the abyss of a nuclear war. But by no means can we say it has disappeared and it may well grow again, particularly if we allow the threat and the use of weapons of mass destruction – ABC, not just atomic, but also biological and chemical – to become an everyday political feature.

In its final consequence Hans Jonas related his principle of responsibility to the thought of respect for the order of creation and its creator. For liberation theology, too, such thoughts are pivotal. Even Albert Schweitzer’s ethics of ,respect for life’ boils down to this.

In a practical humanism on an atheistic basis, no matter how much it respects the genuine beliefs, the ,true religion’ of others³, this is not possible. However, this does not mean that it has to do without such principles of political and moral attitude. It is my conviction that it has to take these principles even much more seriously: for that which sentimental variants of a religious attitude of faith⁴ seem to deem sufficient – namely the taking up of such a posture only *in foro interno*, that means only quietly and silently immediately in front of the creator God, like in prayer. The serious acceptance of a political and moral attitude also means that one has to act appropriately and as effectively as possible.

Max Weber’s differentiation between an ethics of opinion and one of responsibility is claimed, time and again, in defense of a certain pragmatic opportunism which only sets out to do that which it is really feasible to put into immediate practice. But it actually means the very opposite: only those who do everything conceivably possible to achieve appropriate results of their actions do justice to their political and moral responsibility – of course, these considerations must be

³ [such an atheist] must, however, distinguish it critically from ,false religion’ in order to be able to give it serious respect.

⁴ who as such have to live with the suspicion of being ,false religions’ – amongst whom, however, we must not under any circumstances count Jonas, Schweitzer or liberation theology, who demand effective action and not just good wishes.

undertaken in cold blood and realistically, for wishful thinking doesn't help one little bit. The effort thus demanded always includes the fight for the appropriation of the necessary skills and the implementation of appropriate conditions for action – otherwise we cannot do justice to the responsibility for the achievement of appropriate results of our actions.

Even among atheistic humanists we will find the opinion that for them, there simply is no authority in front of whom they had to face their responsibility. According to that opinion, a decadent irresponsibility or even an unlimited mirage of that which might be possible would have to set the rules for those who believe they can do without a God: following the motto of a cynical reading of Nietzsche – ‚God is dead, and everything is allowed’ – or in imitation of Daniel Düsentrrieb's motto: ‚there's nothing an engineer cannot do’.

True experience alone teaches us that this is not the case. Even among totally dedicated atheists we find little of Nietzsche's cynicism or of Daniel Düsentrrieb's well-known attitude. However, it is quite easy to understand why things are by no means organized in such a way as a theocentric view of the world would have us believe: for, falling back on a fundamental thought of Ludwig Feuerbach, we can demonstrate that even those who believe in a Creator God and an order of creativity always, whenever they want to connect something definite with this, cannot help take recourse to images of humankind. Even if for themselves, the influence of their God and their own communication with him is to take place behind this, by giving words to their responsible attitude - in their thoughts they enter into relationships with other people, and that not just with this one or that, but with them as human beings, as representatives of a humanity that is understood in an inclusive, universal way.

Atheists – albeit without linking the relevant ‚background actions’ with this – are no less capable of this. The authority before which they feel responsible will always be other people as human beings, and thus, in the long run, humankind. For them, this responsibility before others does not come equipped with additional guarantees, but for that it is no less real – nor does it have any different content.

6 Military taxes or peace taxes

In a historical process supported by political action there is always somebody who has to take on responsibility to enable effective action to take place. In light of the current deep crises of all mankind it is high time that this happens not only on the sides of established power and might, who are, when it comes to the crunch, to blame for these crises, but ‚bottom up’ from the side of the powers of liberation, the only ones who will be capable of seeing through lasting solutions to problems.

These powers of a ‚politics bottom up’ are capable of subjecting this historical process to dialectic of limiting and delimiting of power and responsibility. Faced with the increasing importance of military expenditure in the tax budget of most states, we are all called to start with ourselves with the gentle power of refusal – with the refusal of any complicity, with consistent not-joining-in, with the refusal to continue to supply the necessary resources for wrong, destructive action.

The Peace Tax project has a clear content: to testify for one's own unwillingness to be involved in war – in view of the worldwide and unlimited state of war which the declared war on terror has only placed into a particularly bright light. But we also need to be wise: that means we need to take each other's counsel, act together in order to be most effective – and also try avoiding ineffectual martyrdom if possible!

I can only wish you a successful running of your conference, for that is in all our interests.