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Beyond the Last Jedi – Uncompromising Hope in the Politics of Star Wars

Lucas Miranda

Florida International University, lmira031@fiu.edu

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Beyond the Last Jedi – Uncompromising Hope in the Politics of Star Wars

Abstract

Star Wars: The Last Jedi was probably the most political movie of the franchise so far. In this piece, I analyze how this film has subverted much of the SW lore by, interestingly, making its political dimensions significantly more real (and hence more complex). Throughout the piece, I use this reflection as a heuristic device to comment on how the movie might teach us how to interpret, critique, and deal with politics in a more sound, effective, and hopeful manner. E. H. Carr is invoked to assist in this endeavor, as I reflect upon the themes of (neoliberal) war profiteering, the efficacy of heroism, and the traps of political idolatry and ideological fanaticism.

Keywords

Star Wars, political cycles, complexity, war profiteering, ideological fanaticism, E.H. Carr

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Cover Page Footnote

Lucas Miranda has a Masters in Political Science at Florida International University. He aspires to get his PhD in political theory in order to keep exploring the concepts of anomie and individuality in the modern age. He has written book reviews for Marx & Philosophy Review of Books and his previous essay on Rick and Morty was also published in "Class, Race and Corporate Power".

(A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...there was no internet filled with spoilers. This is not that galaxy. Thus, be warned, there are spoilers ahead of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*).



(<https://image.zn.ua/media/images/645x426/Dec2017/192767.jpg>)

“This is not going to go the way you think” – Luke told us in the trailer. And he was right. Rian Johnson’s *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* did not go the way we thought it would. Regardless of what one may think of the movie, it would be hard to argue that this film is not unique. Yet, despite how “different” it may be, I would argue this is one of the most “Star Warsy” chapters of the saga—at least thematically. The core of Star Wars has always been a smash of mythology, philosophy, and politics. Episode VIII found a balance and a way to integrate these three themes in a very subtle manner. Indeed, Rian Johnson decided to take a peculiar direction in this film as he breaks and moves beyond old patterns (while still paying homage and learning from what Star Wars has always delivered). It deliberately plays with our expectations, rethinks the eternal battle of the light and the dark, and questions the very idea of heroism. And yet, I would argue, *The Last Jedi*, in one way or another, should remind Star Wars fans why they love Star Wars.

In the age of online-trolling, meme wars, and click-baits, fans will surely continue to complain and debate about all sorts of things: the use of the Force, whether or not there was any purpose to Finn and Rose’s storyline, Rey’s (nobody) parents, Luke’s heroically brave dismissal of his iconic lightsaber, and whatever else does not hit their fanatic hearts in the right way (because when it does not, we all know how fans react: it’s blasphemy!) But this piece is not about these discussions. This piece is about Star Wars’ mythology, philosophy, and politics. Very much like Rian Johnson did, I want to draw upon the entirety of the canon so far (also including recent books considered canon) in order to examine how the universe of Star Wars, by deepening some of the most fantastical elements of its universe, has interestingly brought some realism to its more political dimensions. I will explore this “realism” through three related political themes: war profiteering, the efficacy of heroism, and the trap of ideological fanaticism. These themes will be explored analogously to the ways we can now further interpret the Force and the legacy of the Jedi. The former has got significantly more *complex* and the latter definitely more

ambiguous—two adjectives which once introduced to anything are bound to make that infinitely more *real*. In order to make this analogy, E. H. Carr’s take on the complexity of political thought will be of great significance.

Beyond Good and Evil: Sound Political Thought

E. H. Carr (1892-1982) was an English historian and diplomat whose work became an early significant contribution to the literature of international relations theory. His greatest work is arguably *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* where he reflects on the state of international politics between the two World Wars through a philosophical analysis of many dichotomies: realism and idealism, utopia and reality, theory and practice, morality and power. The dialectical interplay of these, he argues, resemble “a balance always swinging towards and away from equilibrium and never completely attaining it.”ⁱ In *The Last Jedi*, the light and the dark side of the Force resemble such opposites: always swinging towards and away from balance and integration. At least a similar notion might have always been implied in every Star Wars movie. But none of the movies so far have explored the complexity of the spectrum of the Force as *The Last Jedi* did.

Carr contends that “utopia and reality are thus the two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place.”ⁱⁱ There is a parallel that can be made with how the Force is approached in *The Last Jedi*. The first great moment the Force is discussed is in the first lesson Luke teaches Rey: the Force is not just a power the Jedi have to make things float. Rather, the Force is the energy between all things, between all great opposites, such as life and death, which constitute all of existence. And that same energy, that same force, is also inside every one of us. Because of its ubiquitous nature, the Force encompasses all that is “good” and “evil” as to transcend these very notions. In fact, this is a very holistic approach to the Force. When the dark calls Rey, Luke tells her “it offered something you needed,” meaning that “the dark side” and “the light,” although representing extremes opposites, each has its virtues and vices rather than the narrower view of a hero’s worldview versus a villain’s worldview. The message that *The Last Jedi* tries to convey is that a more realistic (and hence more profound and complex) approach to the Force would mean that there is no such thing as heroes and villains in that manicheist manner; every individual in the galaxy are constantly flowing through the spectrum of the Force. Sometimes they gravitate towards the dark, sometimes towards the light; sometimes we are better served closer to one end, sometimes closer to the other. Sometimes, the Rebellion or the Resistance, fighting for a just cause, might need to get dirty. Indeed, wars are always morally dubious and politically complex. Sometimes we need more theory than practice; sometimes more power than morality—and all vice-versa. To paraphrase Carr, the dark and the light are thus the two facets of the Force. Wise thought, and a well-planned course of action, will be found only where both have their place.

However, until *The Last Jedi*, the Force was constituted upon a very rigid dichotomy: the light and the dark. Indeed, the philosophy of the Force has always been starkly Manichean. If you are sensitive to the Force, either you are a Jedi or a Sith (despite Obi-Wan saying that “only the Sith

deals in absolutes”...). But now, in *The Last Jedi*, the key word is *balance*. This is made clear in *The Last Jedi* as Luke and Snoke, the two (allegedly) quintessential characters on each side, say virtually the same thing: Luke says, “balance: powerful light, powerful darkness”; Snoke says: “Darkness rises and light to meet it. I warned my young apprentice, as he grew stronger his equal in the light would rise.”

Another great metaphor given in the movie is the three scenes of Luke confronting Kylo (still as his apprentice, Ben Solo). First, Luke tells the story as if Kylo was willing to kill his master due to his absolute darkness. Then, in Kylo’s version, Luke is depicted as the envious and misguided master who attempted murder on his defenseless nephew. And of course, the truth lied in the middle. Both Luke (at first) and Kylo were not able to see beyond their subjective perspectives. Both versions represented the narrow view of a hero’s worldview vs. a villain’s worldview. If opposites are always two sides of the same coin, then, not surprisingly, the other important facet of discussing “balance” is that of “conflict.” The balance found in the middle of these two versions was precisely in the encounter of two conflicted souls: a conflicted master lost in shame and guilt and a conflicted apprentice lost in anger and confusion. Both versions were a lie in their truth. The conflict of both versions represented a balance always swinging towards and away from equilibrium and never completely attaining it—until Luke was able to do so, at least symbolically, by telling Rey the truth.¹

The point here is that it is quite infantile to imagine, in real life, a “good side” solely made up by heroes responding to some higher call of justice against a “bad side” solely made up by villains orchestrating the antithesis of what is Good and Right. Yet, this rhetoric is constantly used to advance neoliberal agendas, including but not only limited too, war. For instance, this was the rhetoric used by former President George W. Bush to invade Iraq to defeat “The Axis of Evil.” Indeed, such rhetoric of “us vs. them” is deployed to both legitimize neoliberal imperialism as well to delegitimize any attempt of resistance or criticism (violent or not).

In *The Last Jedi*, the complexities of political machinations taking place in order to support/finance wars is for the first time a theme explored in a Star Wars movie. Although the entire Canton Bight/casino planet sequence (where these themes are explored) is probably the weakest part of the movie (and its purpose, plot-wise, questionable), this is when we get the most socio-political commentary. And it’s done quite nicely as we get to see an overt economic distinction of social classes (i.e., “class struggle”). Shortly before landing on the planet, Rose tells Finn this is where “the worst people in the galaxy” resides—as we are shown obviously exorbitant rich aliens and humans living in pure extravagance and lavishness. Then, she adds to it: “only one business in the galaxy can get you this rich.” And that is: war profiteering. Later on in this subplot, it is revealed how such groups in the galaxy sell weapons to both the Resistance and to the First Order. Indeed, selling weapons to every side of a war, benefiting from its

¹ There’s something very Aristotelian in this view, where the virtue is of necessity to be found in “the middle.” Indeed, a lot of what is discussed in this piece could be reflected in a more Aristotelian lens in regards with the vices of extremes. For more on this essential component of Aristotle’s philosophy, see Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

longevity and to willingly make war a constant variable of international politics, has been quintessential neoliberal policy since the end of WWII, has always been the purpose of the industrial military complex (which predates neoliberalism), and, finally, speaks directly to the heart of the capitalist world system we live in.

Beyond one's Time: Learning from Failure

The Last Jedi is a story revolving around legends, heroes, and villains. But it is also a story about cycles which unfold to prove the burdens of legends as well as the illusory idealism of believing in heroes and villains—an idealism which could be just as dangerous as it is sometimes utterly necessary.

In order to elaborate on this, let us briefly recap the political narrative of Star Wars: a long time ago, there was the ostensibly democratic Old Republic, protected and championed by the Jedi council. However, corruption was rampant along with structural problems enabling deadlocks and endless bickering over taxation and whatnot (you can hate the sequels as much as Anakin hated sand, but there were some interesting, though not always riveting, political machinations presented). These, eventually, led to the rise of Palpatine's tyranny and the ascension of his empire—as “liberty dies with a thunder of applause.” The empire ruled for a while until the Jedi returns and Vader kills the emperor, thus, allegedly, bringing the empire to an end. The arduous transition to a New Republic is marvelously explored in the novel *Aftermath* which explores how the end of a political regime does not end so simply by heroic deeds, involving lightsabers, occurring in a single room between three individuals. Nonetheless, with much effort, the New Republic rises. It rules for a while until it starts falling apart, again, by endless deadlocks and structural problems of corruption (which is explored in another marvelous novel, *Bloodline*). In this book, we see Leia realizing how the New Republic is bound to fail and destined to doom while the First Order rises (“from the ashes of the empire” which really never ceased to exist within the New Republic).² Now, the First Order reigns after have destroyed the New Republic and decimated the Resistance (although its spark lives on). This cyclical story of power and politics can be recognized in the following passage from E. H. Carr:

*The ideal, once it is embodied in an institution, ceases to be ideal and becomes the expression of selfish interest, which must be destroyed in the name of a new ideal. This constant interaction of irreconcilable forces is the stuff of politics. Every political situation contains mutually incompatible elements of utopia and reality, of morality and power.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In *The Last Jedi*, we see that Luke has comprehended all of this. Luke tells Rey that the Jedi have been romanticized and deified, but if you look at their deeds, their legacy is one of failure:

² *Bloodline* is not just a must read for any Star Wars fan, but it is also a book essentially about politics. I urge any political enthusiast/scholar who also loves Star Wars to check it out (*Aftermath* and *Thrawn* are also incredible and political sophisticated too).

they let the Old Republic be destroyed due to their own hubris. The Jedi were not above the constant interaction of morality and power which constituted their very politics and philosophy. The Jedi, after all, were blind to the complexity of the Force and thus blind to the pitfalls of their own ways; they were attached to their political status, prophecies, and legends. Indeed, to use all words used by Luke, they were too absorbed in their own hubris, hypocrisy, and vanity. This leads us to the relation between the themes of cycles and failures (and ultimately, heroism).

Luke is now an acrimonious, disillusioned old man who has exiled himself on an island. Similar to the reiteration of the fall of another Republic and the rise of new tyranny (let alone the rise and fall of multiple death stars), Luke finds himself in the same position as Yoda when the viewer first meets him in *Empire Strikes Back*: an acrimonious, disillusioned old creature who has exiled himself in a planet. Both found themselves reluctant to train a new Jedi. Both have lived to see their hopes shattered by their failures. Both have failed to live up to their idolized-selves. In *Empire Strikes Back*, wiser than in the end of *The Revenge of the Sith*, Yoda is still dealing with his failures from the past. In *The Last Jedi*, now in his ghost form, it seems that he has grown even wiser and has truly comprehended the meaning of mentorship. He tells Luke this beautiful passage: “Pass on what you have learned: mastery, folly, weakness, failure...failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is. We are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters.” Hence the cycle of knowledge: one learns; one fails; one teaches; one learns...and so on. Learning from failures and learning from the past is the greatest lesson in *The Last Jedi*.

If Kylo Ren is indeed lost in the Force, it is precisely because he hasn't learned this lesson yet. Quite the contrary, as he says a few times in the movie, he is willing to let the entire past die—“to kill it, if you have to.” What he fails to understand is that even if Luke, Snoke, the Resistance, the Jedi and the Sith die, their legacies will move on, and with them, their constant interaction of irreconcilable forces. That is, forever driven by mutually incompatible elements of utopia and reality, of morality and power, the politics of the galaxy, their very human/alien condition, will always move on and continue beyond any period's crisis, epochal conundrum, or anyone's glory or failure. The reality encompassing their stories will never cease to be inherently complex and subject to perpetual change.³ The lesson is to find the balance in the midst of all chaos one has lived so far, and thus to embrace one's conflict, to challenge one's politics, to challenge one's philosophy, to accept one's failures and mistakes, and then to pass on all the knowledge there attained and all the experiences there lived. What Luke has comprehended, and what has at least initially shattered his hopes and made him so disillusioned, is that the struggle between the light and the dark side will never end. In the last moments of the movie, Luke sums up the final message which follows from all this, which I will convey in the following manner: in every ending there is a new beginning. One battle is over, but the war rages on; the Resistance is shattered, but from its surviving spark it is reborn; and finally, Luke dies—but the force continues beyond him and the Jedi lives on.

³ Dr. Manhattan's last words in *Watchmen* (the graphic novel) are very reminiscent of this idea: “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p09c0MXDxto&list=LLa-N8ff1pd-A0ArPQM8Wslg&index=9>)

In sum: *the dialectical forces and complexity of political life will always be with you*. Perceiving political reality as a constant interaction of irreconcilable forces bound to keep reoccurring is the reason why to learn with the past, and being able to perceive bankrupted patterns repeating, is so crucial (especially in terms of political strategy). On one hand, the Left, both in the US and globally, would benefit immensely in revising its tactics; in questioning which have been effective and which have not. For example, in the US, the Left has no more reason whatsoever to keep positing any hope in the Democratic Party. But following the movie's lessons, from breaking with the Democratic Party, the Left should be able to take a different and newer direction—one that learns and breaks with the past simultaneously. By the same token, too many people who still support capitalism should admit its failures, embrace the idea of change, and learn how to think differently. In either case, sound political thought is never easy: it must always come with the humility to accept failures and the predisposition to break from old patterns. And, at the end, one has to own whatever may come—cautious and alert, but always hopeful. Hope in politics only dies when one has accepted what is and given up of what ought to be.

Furthermore, this is precisely what makes heroism a concept as fragile and deceptive as, at the same time, necessary. Luke might not had been the hero Rey believed him to be, but sometimes we have to see beyond the individual behind the legend and simply be *inspired* by the symbol it forever represents. It is excellent writing that just when Luke is confronting his past failures, saying he is no legend, Rey confronts him back: “the galaxy may need a legend.” Especially in that context, this may just be the most important quote of the movie. Luke's final moments symbolize this as he comes into terms with the entirety of his hero's journey; that is, how both his failures and glories have led him to become a legend that people look to (and with great power, comes great responsibility). In the last scene of the movie, we see the poor kids from Canto Bight retelling Luke's heroic sacrifice (as one kid triumphantly utters the words “Luke

Skywalker, Jedi master”) and from that we sense a glimpse of all the emotions which heroism arouses in us—epitomized when one kid picks up his broom, shows his Resistance ring, and stares at the galaxy knowing that good exists, and letting us know that hope prevails. Hopefully, that kid will know that, in a good Marxist fashion, the only hope worth having is the one that transcends contemplation and makes “what ought to be” into the new “what is.” In other words, he better put that broom into use (just as Leftists better put their hope into practical, and clever, use too).

Conclusion: Beyond Simplicity and Towards Uncompromising Hope

When perception of political phenomena neglects inherent complexity, perpetual change, and contingent ambiguity, the subjective dynamism of political life is misinterpreted as a static, linear continuum of social events which knows nothing of paradoxes or the intricacy of the intersubjectivity underlying social reality. However, as we are political animals, our ideologically-wired minds are too often seduced by the simplicity of romantic heroism. This is one of the reasons why movies are means of escapism. And this is also the reason why *The Last Jedi* was so (negatively) mind-blowing for so many people. It shoved a good dose of reality in our faces. Take for instance when Kylo Ren looks at Rey (a paean to the toxic fanboys in the audience as well) and mercilessly says: “you have no place in this story. You come from nothing, you are nothing.” In this surprising turn of events, Rey epitomizes the touch of realism the film has introduced to the saga. The entire concept of idealist heroism was destroyed in front of our eyes through nobody less than the very movie’s protagonist. By doing so, Rey represents all of us. In the ideological spectrum of politics, we are all nobodies made up by a great deal of complexity—flowing through such spectrum of morality and power, theory and practice.

Just like “the Jedi have been romanticized,” too many scholars and thinkers are often elevated to degrees such as of “canonical figures.” I am not suggesting we should drop the term, but, too often, we forget these were human beings, products of their time, and results of a lifetime of intersubjective relations with themselves and others. The Founding Fathers (as well as the US Constitution) are great examples of this. And to follow religiously certain “canonical figures” and try to mindlessly apply their thought in just any circumstance is exactly what we call idolatry. And such blind idolatry is bound to lead to fanaticism, and thus, bound to make political damage. Indeed, “politics of fanaticism” has been the political ethos of Right-wingers for, at least, the last decade. A fitting example here is how Right-wingers have often harnessed conspiracy theories only to emotionally incite individuals whose (fanatical) political identities crave for anything that confirms the Manichean romance of their lives. The “heroes” bred by the Right in such a fashion are toxic iterations of heroism par excellence. Such “heroes” are nothing more than sheer examples of political idolatry and ideological fanaticism (phenomena excessively present in all of the Right ideological camp). While the “heroism” of the Right is classic representation of false consciousness (which capitalism nourishes so splendidly), the heroism of the Left has continuously been grounded on facts and intellectualism while (not always in the most effective way) been developed as praxis towards emancipation. And the

reason why such a distinction is indeed consistent with reality is precisely because the Left has always been more attuned with the complex nature of human affairs and, not shunning away from it, has always dealt with it as responsibly as possible. Inspirational figures should be those who perceive the world through, as well are perceived by, such lens.

The Right would do well in revisiting some of what conservative Edmund Burke himself had to say:

The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity: and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suited either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs.^{iv}

The Left cannot and should not make the same mistake of neglecting this, ever, no matter the circumstance, no matter any apparent benefit—short term or long term. The complexity of intellectual integrity, of *sound political thought*, should always prevail over the simplicity of political expediency. That is the only way that the ideal of education, of comprehending the world around us, can remain free of dogmas, free of radicalism, free of ignorance—all of that the Right masterfully represents today. Indeed, there is no such thing as “good” and “bad” heroism. There is only heroism and fanaticism. The former should always be approached with caution and the latter only with reproach. To stay away from the latter, may the Left learn with the past and embrace the future with nothing but fruitful humbleness and uncompromising hope—always bearing in mind that hope in politics only dies when one has accepted what is and given up of what ought to be.



(<https://i.stack.imgur.com/jA0H0.jpg>)

ⁱ E. H. Carr (Twenty Year's Crisis, p. 12)

ⁱⁱ E. H. Carr (Twenty Year's Crisis, p. 10)

ⁱⁱⁱ E. H. Carr (Twenty Year's Crisis, p. 88)

^{iv} Edmund Burke (Reflections on the French Revolution, p. 443)