

THE TWO WORLD WARS AS EVIDENCE OF THE ABSENCE OF INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

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Abstract

The First World War and the decades of turmoil thereafter, namely the 1930s, the Second World War and, later, the Cold War, are historical moments relevant to prove that one of the most famous ideas of International Relations is, in fact, impossible. The idea of an ontologically, yet not phenomenologically, permanent state of war is incompatible with a world filled with sovereignties. These sovereignties have never lost their political and strategic control of wars, not even in the main conflicts of the 20thc. All these conflicts were strategically mediated and never led to absolute war.

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The First World War and the decades of turmoil thereafter, namely the 1930s, the Second World War and, later, the Cold War, are historical moments relevant to prove that one of the most famous ideas of International Relations is, in fact, impossible. We are referring to the idea of international anarchy.

Obviously, we must start by defining the issue at hand. In this short paper, we will clearly not focus on all the nuances of the concept of war or that of international anarchy, nor will we analyze in detail all the reasons for our definitions of the concepts we present. The referred definitions will be important for the reader to know what we mean when we discuss war and international anarchy.

1. War and Sovereignty: the sovereign standardization of war and absolute war.

Thus, we can start by defining the concept of war as "violence (fight, scale duel) among political groups (or groups with politico-sacral objectives), in which resorting to armed conflict is a potential possibility at least, so as to attain a goal in the limits (preferably external) of politics (or mainly political goals but not only, from the modern era onwards) aimed at the opponent's sources of power and developing in a continuous game of possibilities and chances".¹

The parenthesis are crucial here for the *de jure* internalization of war in political action, in politics itself, is established only in the Modern Era and, step by step, by an almighty force that will have the means to do it: sovereignty. It is the sovereign, that absolute, endless and indivisible power, defined by exception, by the ability to proclaim a state of exception, i.e., to make war an ordinary event.

War becoming an ordinary implies desacralizing it; this secularization, carried out by the sovereign, changes the features of war, which was, until then, mythologized and enshrined in a dystopian manner, out of reach for the common human being. The sovereign links the worlds of peace and war which were separate until the modern era, blend order and disorder in a new state that allows the possibility, the ontological and

¹ For those familiar with strategic means, the definition is inspired in another by Abel Cabral Couto. The definition by the Portuguese strategist was originally published by him in (Couto, 1989: 148), who states that: "organized violence among political groups, in which resorting to armed conflict is at least a potential possibility so as to attain a political end, aimed at the opponent's sources of power and developing in a continuous game of possibilities and chances".



phenomenological possibility of permanent war because from there onwards war is viewed as an ordinary political action. A state that we may define as a state of peace under sovereign conditions.

Obviously, the sovereign, or better, the several sovereigns in the international scenario must have some control over it because you can only rule what you know. The state of exception is not the chaos before or after order but a state in force at a time when legal order has been suspended, when law cannot be formulated and we can hardly tell if we are complying or breaking the law; a state in which you are completely dependent on the discretion of the sovereign, or on the sovereign governmental mechanisms, but not on their arbitrariness, as this would tend towards anarchy, towards disorder.²

Yet, if war is partly a state of exception, when you can kill and that is not considered a homicide, it is equally an exception beyond the state of exception, so to speak. We cannot forget the value of marginal utility, which establishes "price", the ultimate sense or *nonsense* of war as a phenomenon with internal and autonomous consistency, i.e., with its own grammar, what Clausewitz named absolute war. This is the irredeemable core of war, the absolute chaos, the cylinder of pure violence, the inner core of armed conflict, which, though not encompassing all manifestations of war, is present and fuels each war that breaks out, always fostering extremes because extremes tend to go extreme. This implies that a war fueled by its own sources leads to a politically uncontrolled state, even for sovereign power. In other words: as war has its own grammar, its own internal consistency, or better, its own power of erosion, of huge asymmetries, of disaggregation, it has a core that does not surrender, not even to the power of the sovereign. Unfortunately, that core provides it life, shakes the foundations of normalcy, even the terrible "normalcy" that is the suspension of the sovereign logic. However controlled, war encompasses chaos, continuously deletes order and even challenges sovereign discretion. To let war lose is to risk doom; and the sovereign logic, more than any other political tool, has provided the conditions for war to become extreme, as Clausewitz stated.³

2. International Anarchy as State of War: how permanent war is impossible in a world filled with sovereignties

We must now consider the concept of international anarchy by analyzing the image that realistic thought provided to international anarchy. In our opinion, the most important relevant realistic thinker on this theme is Kenneth Waltz, as he approaches the issue frankly. Nevertheless, all other realistic internationalists also hint at what Waltz clearly states:

"among men as among states, anarchy, or the absence of government, is associated with occurrence of violence" (Waltz, 1979: 102).

² Despite the features of the state of exception as we describe it, we have been influenced by Agamben (Agamben, 2006: 105-106).

³ (Clausewitz, 1986: book VIII, cap.IIIB, 593 and book VIII, cap.VIB, 606), respectively, for realizing that under Napoleon war is close to extreme, of its absolute form and of powerful politics (and sovereign power is like that); Clausewitz is aware of this, that it powerful politics may help in freeing absolute war from the restrictions that usually control it.



This means that the concept of anarchy (meaning disorder) presupposes an inextricable link with the concept of war. Obviously, there is no internationalist related to the concept of international anarchy who considers international anarchy a permanent and generalized factual state of war or disorder. War is not, in today's international life, a factual necessity. The concept of international anarchy means rather that, ultimately, each international actor cannot depend but on its imposing capacities, on its own power. This means that, even when there is no order or disorder (phenomenology), war tends to be about the actors, more than a possibility, the ultimate reason (ontology) for their behaviour. Thus, we can state that anarchy is a state of disorder linked to armed violence, i.e., the sense or (non)sense of violence is at the basis of international politics, is its background, its ontological blood, its inner soul. To sum up, the state of war is ontologically present and sometimes also phenomenologically in existence.

The distinction is clear and it was clear to Hobbes when he states in *Leviathan* that

"war is not just the battle, it is not just fighting but also includes that time in which the will to fight is well known.[...] the nature of war does not consist of actual fighting but in the known will to do so, during all the time when there is not guarantee of the opposite. The remaining time is one of peace. So, all that is valid for a time of war, when all humans are enemies, the same is valid for the time when humans live with no other security than that provided by their own strength and invention. In such a situation, there is no room for industry, for its fruit is uncertain; thus, the land is not cultivated, there is no sea traveling or use of goods[...]",

and so one, says Hobbes. Interestingly enough, I argued shortly after that, though sovereigns live in permanent rivalry, with arms ready, like gladiators watching one another, which, for him, is an attitude of war, he nevertheless concludes that

"since they protect their subjects' industry that way, it does not lead to the poverty that is typical of free yet isolated humans"
(Hobbes, 2002: cap. XIII, 111-112).

Hobbes is drawing our attention to the fact that the sovereigns' attitude evidences a structural predisposition for war, but not more than that (which is a lot!), because if it was more than that, there would be no industry to protect, there would only be the poverty he himself described. This accurate argumentation by Hobbes would suffice to refute any attempt to root the idea of international anarchy in the English philosopher's writings. But that is another matter.⁴

⁴ For refutation of the idea of international anarchy being Hobbes', as well as criticism to the foundations regarding the concept of international anarchy, see Fernandes (2012).



However, if international anarchy is an endemic state of armed violence, we have a real incompatibility issue. A structural state of war related to both previous understanding and to ontological understanding of its political actors is not compatible with the ruling character of sovereignty. The issue is not the changing from *hostis* to *inimicus*, because the sovereign easily makes that transition. The qualitative degree opponents face one another with is not decisive because sovereigns, due to their need to rule, even if disputing only a few items, may well demonise their opponent, even if that is the riskier option because it allows (does it does not impose) extremes and the management of war. The issue resides in the dimension of disorder, or in its nuclear "standardization", precisely in the management of war as background, as ontological principle that limits behaviour and as explanatory epistemological principle because otherwise there would be no sovereign, considering that, by definition, what escapes order escapes sovereignty of absolute power (of designing and breaking the law). The state of war as a rule would eliminate sovereign objectives. If the operational core of international relations were war, sovereignty would never have existed, and as sovereignty does exist and sovereign logic still predominant, state of war cannot be a decisive factor. Hobbes' Lord Protector would protect nothing, leviathan would not be the one, which seems a contradiction, since sovereigns have that standardized predisposition to war considering the huge potential for conflict generated by the closeness of powers which are by nature exclusive. Besides, not only would be the logical consistency of sovereignty radically affected by the entropic abyss of war as a motor of international politics, but rather the first and foremost reality of sorority, inescapable even for sovereigns, the remaining equal, as we have tried to prove before (Fernandes, 2012: 93-97). Where there are sovereigns, anarchy just does not make sense, war is not the first word, only its possibility is. Yet, since we are talking about its ontological and not simply its phenomenological character, the difference between possibility and reality is abysmal.

In other words, I am considering the previously mentioned secularization of war. If war was the permanent ontological basis, not only would nobody endure that state for long, but especially, war would become a myth again, it would regain its sacred character of demonic power; thus, it would be out of the sovereign's reach, who is, at best, a mortal god, to paraphrase Hobbes. Our reference is to sovereignty itself and not only to the condition of the human that embodies it. Worse, since sovereignty had already destroyed the ontological dichotomy between peace and war, this sacred, uncontrollable presence of war would now become closer to everyday living and, as a consequence, less manageable and controllable, with the inclusion of the figure of power humans had created, sovereignty, as absolute and allowed to humankind.

In the modern era, war became a permanent possibility, continuously hanging over the head of humanity; this allowed for the opening of Pandora's Box. But not as a permanent force of being, passive or active, because the being in potential is already being. If the war was to be that permanent force of being, absolute war would have to be revalued. This would mean that war would set the rules, would change politics and make it an extension of war by other means, something which, as we know, has never occurred. Though it seems nothing can prevent it from happening some day.⁵

⁵ In truth, we doubt this will ever happen because of some metaphysically-based anthropological preventions. However, this is not the time or place to develop these considerations.



Nevertheless, if there is rooted sovereignty, then a state of international anarchy and that sovereignty become an oxymoron. The opposite would be expected: that sovereign dynamics would be a catalyst for anarchy. This is the greatest error in judgment but this is not the place to analyze the origins of that error.

3. Politics and Strategy in the First and Second World Wars: the absence of anarchy

After all, how can the two world wars prove our argument when apparently we should have discarded them?

The direct answer cannot be easily given. War was made by sovereigns and they still exist. Therefore, there is no place for anarchy - in this case the specific features sovereignty has acquired since the onset of the Modern Era up to today are not important.⁶ However, we could retort that, during the war, sovereigns may have lost control and later regained it. That would be strange because of the violence of the two wars and the historical changes they brought about. In any case, this will not be our argument; we will rather introduce an additional element.

The first world conflict sees the rising of an intermediary, which we have not yet mentioned, in the social division of political work: strategy.

Before going any further, and as I did regarding the concepts of war and international anarchy, we will not develop the reasons underlying our definition of strategy. We opted for a soft definition, i.e., a consensual and canonical definition of the term, put forth by the so-called classics in the theory of strategy of the past 50 years in the Western world, where the field has developed free from the shortcomings of Anglo-Saxon theories. Therefore, we can define strategy as collective practical wisdom developed by political actors so as to be prepared and lead hostile confrontation against one another.

Resuming, when the First World War breaks out, though the strategy remains essentially military (and will continue to be so until the end of WWII),⁷ and though the foundations for other strategies are already visible, then gathered under the

⁶ If we consider Christopher Clark's work on the origins of the First World War, we realize that, though in the years prior to the war breaking out, there were more and more voices willing to accept possible war, to consider it a certainty in view of international relations, viewing it as therapeutic (279-281). However, this does not mean that they saw the international scenario as essentially an arena. It was rather an area of possible confrontation, a consequence of the clash between the interests of different sovereignties and the struggle for power these differences implied (Clark, 2013: 237-239). This obviously points towards the sovereign logic, ultimately, for the frenzy of the sovereign kinetics (hard to control even by those sovereigns that give the first step, as was made evident in the outcome of WWI) and not towards the sovereign gap and its specific order.

⁷ In truth, to use a metaphor dear to the new founder of the Portuguese strategic school, Abel Cabral Couto, the last of the great classics of strategy still living and producing, WWI sets the principles for the change from a strategy limited to military action, strategy as a solo recital, in the words of Abel Cabral Couto, to strategy as a specific instrument which remains relevant but is included in a set of support dimensions which will be the start of future economic, diplomatic (perhaps this will be the first), ideological, cultural, communicational strategies, among others. Strategy viewed as a concert for a given instrument. The version we have arrived to is, as you know, that of integral strategy, whose aim is that different sets of instruments, several general strategies, foster a collective harmonious movement. In Abel Cabral Couto's words, this is strategy in its symphonic version. Naturally, though this set of three should not be seen in terms of progress in music, the same could not be said in terms of strategy. Additionally, developing new forms of strategy other than military corresponded to a development in modes of war other than armed fight.



fashionable concept of the time, the defense, a kind of Spanish shelter that encompasses all that does not yet have a precise definition, the truth is that, due to the new conditions of industrial war and the concept of nation at war, it is realized that strategy can no longer be limited to and immersed in the operational aspect of war. Strategy is needed to prepare for conflict and to design objectives to leave the conflict. In practice, strategy's horizontal placing in regards to politics and tactics, i.e., their differentiation due to the social nature of their actions and actors tends to be replaced by a vertical criterion, in which the important is not what is done in the conflict but the relation between their action and political power as well as the consequences of those actions. This means that the strategic social rationalities - the specific conduct that a given society has regarding hostile conflict, which, in view of its exceptional nature leads to intermediate means in correlation with the political guiding principles - gain a never known importance.

How important is this? The answer is not easy, at least for strategists. Wars of the type of the world wars tend to invert the strategic pyramid, subordinating, or at least reducing, the political objectives to those linked to hostility and fall under the scope of strategy. This is a negative situation which places in question the core of strategy, the prudent assumption of the conflict, and that strategy tries to oppose to, reacting against a more violent dynamics of politics so as to avoid squandering of human and material resources though not always successfully. In any case, for the purpose at hand, the important thing is to emphasize that, on those occasions, which are not uncommon in WWI and WWII, politics does not founder because of war but politics becomes more closely linked to violence management. That management, though it has an impact on strategy, making it a function on strategy, is nevertheless still far from being the merciless violence of war. On the contrary, though strategic prudence there becomes evil calculation to assess the ability to inflict damage to the opponent, at the risk of fostering violence beyond control, undermining the very nature of strategy, which is to calm the conflict, fire against fire, that management implies being at the helm, not having been destroyed by violence even in the worst case scenarios of political limitations, of pyramid inversion, of politics being subordinated to strategy.

Why is that? Why is it that strategy, in a self-destructive process - considering that what makes strategy is that it takes on its pyramidal role as an intermediary, being framed by politics in an organized area and towards a firm control of violence - does not simply light the fire? Because the visceral nature of strategy, even when it was only a conduct of war, was to be that personalist counterpoint to violence, better, an unexpected fifth column attempt to put the fire of violence down and provide the conditions for definitive peace.

There are two objection left, though. The first has to do with the concept of total war and its practical application. The concept of total war, introduced by the French politician and journalist Léon Daudet, in 1918,⁸ and afterwards developed and popularized by the German general Erich Ludendorff, in 1935, in his book *Total War*, is not, as it might seem, an all-out war, leading war to its ultimate consequences. Ludendorff's states the opposite, total war implies total politics, the politician should give in to the commander-in-chief, should be the commander-in-chief and thus submit

⁸ Daudet defines total war as the "extension of the fight in its most acute and chronical stages in the political, economic, commercial, industrial, intellectual, legal and financial domains. The fight is not just between the armies but between traditions, habits, codes, spirits and mostly banks" (Daudet, 1918: 8).



politics to strategy exactly because it requires total control. Operations should cease rapidly after attaining the objective so as to avoid inner disintegration of society. (Ludendorff, 1941, 36, 113, 233-).⁹

Actually, the concept of total war is the historical expression of an era after the end of WWI which ends with WWII; it expresses the use of all types of fighting simultaneously and with maximum intensity, whose features also include politics giving in to the objectives of hostility, those who fall under the influence of strategy, if not by politics being subordinate to strategy (and not war) due to its prudential self-neutralization; better still, changing its cognitive register, mere calculation, slyness, mischievous consideration, never abandoning its sense of restraint.

In practice, pyramid inversion was proven not just a serious possibility but rather an historical fact. It is true that, in theory, the fact that politics has a closer link to the political objectives of hostility may lead to a situation of political determination regarding strategy, reducing political synthesis to those objectives and making them ancillary for defining what you want to be in terms of political actor. Nevertheless, it is also true that that closeness tends to boost strategy because it concentrates its strength in its space and thus deforming the prudential logic of strategy. Strategy is then led to radically limit its prudential function and rise to the point of politics becoming strategy, submitting to it because the scopes seemed to overlap and, in that case, strategy appears technically more apt for the task considering the previously mentioned consequences. Needless to say that in the historical situation, the easiest solution was the one adopted - that of confining strategy.¹⁰

The second objection seems more relevant. Because, despite what he have said, it is true that certain passages in the two world conflicts indicate or even mean going beyond the pyramid inversion, politics and strategy becoming immersed in war. The slaughter in Verdun, in WWI, and many episodes (probably more than that) in the

⁹ Jean-Ives Guioamar, French historian of total war, in the previously quoted book, believes that the emergence of total war occurred with the wars by revolutionary France, though he acknowledges that that very same total war is only fully present in the 20th c. (Guioamar, 2004: 25, 102-105, 120, 151). However, we believe the French historian several times overlays the concept of total war and that of absolute war. Though he states (Idem: 302) that he does not aim to solve the issue - which, for him, is an open issue - of whether the concept of total war means the same as that of absolute war. In truth, the author claims (Idem: 19-20) that total war is a war that cannot be stopped or interrupted by the one that declares it, it expands constantly in space and in time. Yet, this is a feature more in tune with absolute war, i.e., war that responds to its specific grammar, than with total war.

¹⁰ In reality, strategy is not a mere technique, instrument, tool. The fall of politics and the consequent rise of strategy, both eventually coinciding, option then being for the preponderance of strategy, do not derive from neutral judgment but rather from instrumental reasoning. Though politics was responsible for strategy, the latter did not have a more passive role. Not only did strategy acquire a retroactive prominence over politics, in terms of moderating it, at the beginning of the nuclear era, when it was framed in political terms, but it also tended to monopolize politics in the era of total war, when it still was a very significant tool. The obvious contradiction must be resolved differently. What happened was that politics and war impacted on strategy in its most violent strands, and as strategy was still undergoing vertical placing criterion which placed it closer to politics, yet still keeping its tactical character, opted for neutralization (it was simpler and more in accordance with its traditional plaining) and thus respond to violence of its most ... strands with a resolution highly instrumental, blind and mechanical. In fact, we saw strategy counteracting as instrumental reason, invading, in an apparently neutral way, other areas which were completely unrelated to hostility. Or would it be plausible to think that this neutralization of aims and the inversion of the pyramid relation between politics and strategy, so as to meet the fascination of a time and an ideology, would ever occur if strategy were a mere instrument? How? What if the pyramid inversion were later reversed, when strategy becomes more robust and once again is an aim in itself, and if that inversion typical of the era of total war, which already inverts a previous context (that which leads to the First World War), in which strategy is less loose but in which sovereign politics is even less incisive than it became later on?



Eastern Front, in WWII, not to mention the genocides, point in that direction. That seems unquestionable. And? The only lesson to be drawn is to acknowledge how easy it is to go to the extreme. Because, in contrast, what we can realize is the difference between these and other stretches of war and that the difference lies in the fact that in other stretches of history, when war is phenomenologically latent, there should ontologically be a state of war. If war were ontologically active, the common situation would be more similar to those dark moments than to any other; better still, after so much time it would be unlike anything.

4. International Anarchy: an image out of the picture

Finally, the Cold War. In this case, it would be best to not even object. The Cold War corresponds to the adult age of strategy as a discipline of intermediary and incomplete aims to be completed in higher political synthesis. Therefore ready as never before for a perfect (or almost perfect) coexistence with politics; under the nuclear threat, the former threat to be able to rapidly make Armageddon. The emergence of nuclear arms and of subversive and counter-subversive doctrines lead strategy to a new era, that in which we strategically live in.

The emergence of the atomic era, or more specifically, the emergence of thermo-nuclear war and the arms race, made it clear that only through dissuasion could catastrophe be avoided. Direct strategy would not pay off. From then on, the war and strategic effort could not be solely military; other strategies would become autonomous. What, according to total war, would be another step in the ladder, becomes a means of fighting war, of carefully and prudently choosing the best strategies. Would strategy be able to do that if it did not have specific aims? If it is true that only after the emergence of nuclear power and later with the possibility of subversive war, which implies a greater coordination between strategy and politics and even the submission of strategy to politics, is strategy allowed to, as integral strategy, to fully evidence its prudential capacities, it is also true the escalating of violence, provided by the new modes of war, did not lead to absolute war only because strategy imposed its prudential resources. And we must not forget that, in all likelihood, absolute war would be at stake, its destructive hubris having been liberated, the state in which, if war ruled, it would not need much time to devastate the earth, a situation which always leads to problems because humans can become tired of such havoc.

But are we not still alive? The question is the answer.

Where politics, and above all strategy (in terms of hostility), flourishes, war, war left to its own devices, international anarchy, cannot flourish. The effort to rise, if real, compromises anarchy because war, left to its own devices, tends towards solipsism, to move towards emptiness. However, neither politics nor strategy, on their own, have the strength to stop armed chaos; you need another reason to do that, a conversion from pure peace, which, in fact, feeds strategy in its development. However, if we look closer, the insufficiency of strategy and politics alone evidence the impossibility of international anarchy, of a state of war ontologically come true. Insufficient is that which is not sufficiently able, which is not able to do something on its own. But would we still be discussing capacity if war ruled or would we be overwhelmed, our actions fostered by the same (hypothetical) hope that we can find at the end of Cormac McCarthy's tragedy *The Road*:



"in deep valleys where the trouts lived, all things were more ancient than Man and in them there was mystery"? (McCarthy, 2007: 187).

The indestructible and primal inclination towards good has been swept away - we do not know how, especially because we are not referring to any accident or of an unexpected effect of a given war. What if this was even more obscure, would we not only dependent of the belated miracle-working miracle?

Luckily, we are not. Then why would advocates of international anarchy want to lead us to the absurd?

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