
THE LIBERAL VIEWS AND THE PROGRESS ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF SECURITY

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Abstract

Over the last two centuries, the progress on the understanding of war determined the evolution of the concept of security. The ideas related to liberalism were influential for that purpose. Over that period, it was possible to examine the notions of war, strategy, and security, and to deepen the understanding of their models. In what concerns security, there has been an evolution from national security to collective security and to the current model of cooperative security, attentive to the human dimension and containing the ideas of liberty, democracy and liberalism.

Keywords

War, Security, Liberalism, People, Cooperation

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*“... if anyone ever proclaimed the most absolute of truths,
he couldn't do it,
everything is interwoven in supposition”*

Aristophanes, quoted by Karl Popper in *In Search of a Better World*

Introduction

It is never correct or realistic to reduce manifestly transcendent ideas to a single concept, nor to enclose them in this insufficient and reductive perspective.

Even so, and seeking to identify what is at the heart of the issue examined here, it will be acceptable to simplify the attempt to understand liberal ideas as having Man as their first cause and ultimate objective.

Also and quite rightly, today we see that people are, or are intended to be, at the centre of the contemporary understanding of security. Even if they are not their only references.

The question that motivates this text is rooted in this double understanding: what influence did the liberal views have and still have on the evolution of the understanding of security?

A foundation for the relationship between Liberalism and Security?

A first observation is that the concepts of liberalism and security have not always been intertwined. Nor could it be otherwise.

It is not disputed that the imperative of security and the corresponding notion long preceded the liberal drive, as it has manifested itself in recent centuries.

One could make very interesting considerations relating to historically more remote times, but the objective of this essay is focused on the two most recent centuries.

This paper does not take into account the relevant contributions of cultures different from those of the Western World, since the liberalism movement occurs in the Western world.

¹ \Article translated by Carolina Peralta.



In a closer historical way, it is reasonable to identify two fundamental references for the progress of the liberal ideas.

The first is to recognize that, although the idea of liberalism dates back to the dawn of the Enlightenment, it was fundamentally with the ideas of John Locke that liberal theories gained substance and support. This is why John Locke (1632-1704) is seen by many as the father of liberalism. The theses he wrote greatly contribute to this interpretation, namely regarding the social contract and tolerance. It is Locke's idea, so central to this reflection, that peace must be based on free and equal men (Locke, 1689)².

For him, men are born in possession of natural rights, in a state of nature characterized by peace and harmony. The realities of collective life, however, lead to the need for regulatory practices. So, the political organization of society and therefore the state, based on the free choice of men, translates into a social pact (Mello, 2000: 85).

Without ignoring the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution, the second great reference for the affirmation and expansion of liberal ideas is found in the French Revolution. It was this revolution, in particular with the thinking that inspired it and marked its initial phase, that, in terms of significant impact on society, consolidated and expanded a particularly strong source of liberal ideas. Consistent and repeated, these ideas were winds of history and blew through many geographies.

That is why the post-French Revolution period, the Contemporary Age, is the time when, with more propriety, one can try to identify and understand the relationship between liberal ideas and security.

Understanding Security

The idea of security is as old as man, first from the perspective of mere individual survival and then progressively extending its scope to the protection of family, clan and tribe.

Within its scope, security corresponds to a political and public practice arising from the need to regulate collective life. In its nature, it is an indispensable condition for social life. Barry Buzan understood security as *a special kind of politics or above politics* (Buzan et al, 1997: 23).

However, it is less important to define precisely the concept of security than to realize its need and identify the ways that build, promote and sustain it.

Naturally, the various security formulas arise from and meet the moral, historical, political and strategic contexts in which they are inscribed (Pinto, 2013: 806). As a regulatory practice of a collective nature, security was structured from the perspective of the other, the one seen and feared as a potential aggressor.

When the tribe evolved to the nation, the security building model continued to be basically that. From a more collective and therefore more political perspective, the aggressor, or simply the potential aggressor, began to be seen as the enemy. The model, starting to be associated with the state, was called national security.

² Locke, John. *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, ed. Abril Cultural, São Paulo, 1978.



The objectives of this security, now of a state centred nature, remained essentially the same, only extended to the dimension of the nation and politically translated by the values of defending national independence, asserting sovereignty and preserving territorial integrity.

It was a binary formula. Us and others. The understanding of power that centuries later was conceptually expounded and that continues to maintain pertinence and legitimacy, although no longer exclusively, has its foundation here. Power was perceived as the ability to impose one's own will on the will of others.

Security, war and strategy

If there is an enemy, even if only a potential one, war is presupposed. At least the risk and probability of war. And if this equation contains two opposing wills, both intelligent and both political in nature, the picture is that of a characteristic exercise of strategy.

The correlation between the ideas of war, strategy and security is based on this, in its genesis and, in particular, with regard to the evolution of the understanding that, in relation to each one of them, has been asserted.

Historically, it was more than a correlation. It had aspects of manifest syncretism. In fact, for many centuries, basically since Ancient Greece, war and strategy were ideas that were hardly dissociable. This also means that throughout this long journey, strategy was perceived as something only related to the military context.

It was only in the first half of the 19th century that war in the Western World was viewed as something much more vast and complex than an exclusively military process. This tremendous conceptual leap was linked to the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, made public in 1832 with the publication of his monumental treatise "On War".

It would not be appropriate to relate Clausewitz directly to liberal ideas. Still, in his work, Clausewitz reflected his experience and observation as an active participant in the European campaigns of the Napoleonic period and immediately afterwards. The book shows an understanding of the organization of society and the state marked by the influence of the liberal ideas.

For the first time in the Western world, the war, despite the presence of violence and its dramatic consequences, lost its character of a "chess game in an indefinite and almost abstract environment", linked to will of the sovereign. War became seen as an integral phenomenon of a political, economic and social context. War became a public thing, concerning the nation and society as a whole, not just the military.

Clausewitz was adamant in subordinating war to politics. In this light, he made explicit precepts hitherto never clearly formulated.

Taken together, these precepts defined and regulated war in new and radically different ways, emphasizing that war is an instrument of politics, which does not have its own objectives or logic, but rather seeks to satisfy the purposes of politics in obedience and coherence with the logic of that same politics. A logic that must therefore guide strategic action, understood as merely military, and that must have peace as its purpose, thus evidencing peace as the true objective of war (Clausewitz, 1976).



This unprecedented and so different vision marked an extraordinary moment of rupture.

However, despite this new and challenging approach, the concepts of strategy and security remained intertwined for a long time.

Both have fully gained the dimension of public practices, concerning the social group and the state and governed by the superior value and responsibility of politics.

The foundation of this situation of interpenetration of the two concepts is found in the convergence and even the overlapping of two main aspects. Security was based on and almost exclusively confined to the military dimension, and the means available for strategic action were fundamentally military.

It took time for the two concepts to become separated. As a reference, human beings were present and decisively important in both evolutions.

It was only in the first half of the 20th century that it was better understood that, in order to serve the objectives of politics well, strategy needed to use all available resources. Those of a material nature, of which the military were only a few, and also the intangible ones, of a moral nature (Hart, 1991: 322).

When strategy opened up to dimensions such as economic, social, cultural and psychological, society as a whole, and with it people, were brought to the heart of strategic action.

The consequent need to ensure the good and useful use of all these dimensions in conjunction and simultaneously with the use of the military dimension, made the tutelary and regulatory function of politics much more salient, both as a definition of purposes, but also as a guide and as an indispensable instrument for controlling action. And it is worth noting the obligatory human intervention in the domain of politics.

On the other hand, the call, both for the axis and for the praxis of the strategy, of intangible resources, such as morality, will or patriotism, all values with origin and repercussion on human beings, accentuated the new importance that from the first half of the 20th century onwards, was given to the value and role of man.

Recent evolution of Security models

It was only later that the trajectory of the idea of security had a new significant development, towards the human. This resulted from the natural and obligatory dependence of security regarding the political and strategic context where it belongs and should serve.

Basically, the classic paradigm of security oriented towards issues relating to independence, sovereignty and the maintenance of territory remained unchanged until the end of the Cold War. Only modified by very demanding circumstances that were revealed and confirmed, it was understood that national security would be better ensured in a collective framework, bringing together allies and partners around common values, objectives and mutual commitments. However, it was a basically an instrumental change.

In its foundations, the idea of collective security, which in some way was tried after World War I and which had a clear consecration after World War II, did not and does not differ



from the national security model. This is with regard to its objectives, the identification of threats and the type of resources it mobilizes.

In both national security and collective security, man is a reference, albeit only implicit. In both, the concern with affirming and preserving freedom is present, an indispensable condition for the dignified and responsible existence of people.

In the post-Cold War environment, all this held up. Both within the framework of states and within the framework of international organizations that include security into their responsibilities. It would be strange if it were not so. But many of the defining parameters of security underwent and still undergo a considerable evolution.

It is no longer focused on a potential enemy and cooperation was identified as inestimable. It was realized that, in addition to the classic expression of coercion, which is more and more difficult to affirm, power also expressed itself through influence and even attractiveness. Insecurity was related to exclusion. To the military vector as a pillar of security and now of equivalent importance, others were added, such as the diplomatic, economic, social and cultural aspects. All of them are the remit of political action, as a way to guarantee that their action, although different in nature, is convergent with the objectives and equally coherent and coordinated.

It was also perceived that it was not possible to ignore the intensely communicational character of the current time. It was understood that it was even positive to use it in the identification and construction of solutions likely to receive a favourable reception when exposed to political and public scrutiny, thus becoming more in line with ethics and, from a pragmatic viewpoint, more sustainable.

The classical objectives remained unchanged and maintained their natural and outstanding consecration in the multiple constitutional frameworks, but to them were added concerns with the safeguarding of people's lives, values, rights and goods.

This new notion, fundamentally characterized by the multidimensionality of actions and the search for cooperation, is called cooperative security (Pinto, 2013: 808).

This formula, now and explicitly, has people at its centre, both as active subjects and as an object of security.

That is why we often see this security model being also referred to as human security. However, it would be more appropriate to call it cooperative security and give it a strong human dimension, attentive to the imperatives of people, whether in terms of their inherent dignity, or in the multiple aspects of their material conditions of life, such as nutrition, education, health or basic infrastructure. There is a clear articulation of security with development and well-being, a link between these two primary and permanent goals.

Once again, the paths of liberal ideas and security cross, inviting an interpretation that is based on the recognition that, also with regard to security, "Man is seen as an end and not as a means", like in Immanuel Kant's idea (1724-1804)³.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (9th edition), published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, 2013.



The focus on man also means that the ultimate goal of cooperative security is of the win-win type, thus moving away from the logic of national and collective security which, quite naturally, is win-lose (Mihalka, 2001: 3).

This latest formula is not binary, but composite, involving multiple actors. It is also a formula whose management is not intended to be hierarchical, sectorial or segmented, but rather through a network, giving operational meaning to the interconnectedness that characterizes today's world and which is expected to be strengthened in the future.

Security models today

What is happening in the world today is the natural coexistence of the three basic models of security: national, collective and cooperative.

The requirements of national security are not disposable and the most effective way to observe them is collectively. Hence, the cooperative formula is progressively asserting itself, either because the political and strategic circumstances so recommend and allow it, or because its foundations are gaining increasing support.

Never losing sight of national security, this "broadband" security corresponds to the view that what is most widely practiced today corresponds to collective security against nobody and cooperative security with all who want to promote and practice it (Pinto; 2013: 808).

As it is natural, the dependence on the political and strategic context determines that the content and intensity of this triple understanding of security differs according to the different geopolitical spaces.

Liberal vision multilateralism and security validation

It is also worth remembering that, regardless of the model followed, security objectives have a reinforced validity when they emanate from political wills whose legitimizing matrix is liberal, is constitutionally enshrined and benefits from public scrutiny. Under this more demanding framework, visions and decisions, even if perhaps more difficult to affirm, become particularly robust.

At international level, this observation invites reflection on the type of regulatory instruments that can best stimulate a legitimate, adequate and understood security agenda.

From this perspective, the liberal vision that has influenced multilateralism appears again as a privileged potentiating factor. Especially if we refer to the vision that prevailed in the post-Cold War and if we remove the so-called neo-liberal and economic perspectives that, particularly at the beginning of this period, were also asserted.

However, it is necessary to work on a renewed and deeper multilateralism that emphasizes the focus on people and which, without failing to recognize competition, opposition and political and strategic disturbances, tries to move away from the geopolitics of power, centred on competition or on political and strategic antagonism.



The renewal and deepening of the multilateralism that we know so far must include the recognition of the existence of other relevant actors, in addition to states and international organizations. The presence on the present international political and strategic scene of large transnational corporations, churches, media operators, regions, city networks, NGOs and people is an undeniable fact. However, so far these other actors have not been sufficiently called upon to constructively contribute to global agendas and to commit to them.

In addition to opening up to new actors, it will also be important for a renewed multilateralism to recognize and observe the scope of security, thus taking as a fundamental norm that security cannot be promoted and built against people and without people. This is a principle that power geopolitics theories do not follow nor wish to follow.

If the lucidity and determination to follow this path of refreshing and deepening multilateralism with correct liberal inspiration prevails in the world, it will be easier to find solutions that better satisfy such essential values as freedom and democracy. And they will better support a more humane, more equitable and more legitimate security (Guterres, 2020).

It will not be a simple exercise.

From an immediate perspective, the mental constructions linked to power geopolitics suggest that they contain great evidence, served by many indicators and abundant statistics that seek to extract unquestionable trends and conclusions.

However, a closer, more ambitious and more demanding look points out that we need to bear in mind that the world agenda faces very important challenges. They include those related to the environment, climate change, pandemic control, risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear weapons, cyberspace, technological progress and the possibilities and risks that are anticipated from it, unregulated migratory movements, crises of representative democracy and of the market economy, hunger, systemic scarcity of resources, poverty and the persistence of broad underdeveloped areas.

These are challenges that, due to their nature, go beyond the simple scale of priorities and that should be labelled as existential.

It is impossible not to recognize that all of this calls for more cooperation and less competition, and for an agenda for promoting, building and sustaining local, regional and global security as an individual and collective value.

The relevance and urgency of these challenges outweighs the considerations made about the risks underlying both models, power geopolitics and multilateral cooperation.

The approaches that have informed the United Nations Human Development Reports are based on these lines and on the identification of possibilities and limitations found in the political, economic and social fields, with a view to making it possible to promote and sustain security that matters to people (Rezende, 2016: 307)⁴.

⁴ In the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP), seven dimensions of human security are considered: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, political, and community.



Proposals and the construction of political and practical solutions are expected. They should cover the plurality of contemporary life, including new threats and risks, and be able to bring together all the actors of the international society.

The multilateral approach, renewed, valued, and certainly much more demanding, is the only one whose nature and inherent objective will allow us to follow this path and thus serve the common and superior purposes of humanity. It is a multilateralism that brings results to the people it aims to serve (Guterres, 2020).

Final considerations

Although it is not realistic to establish direct causal relationships between the values and proposals of liberalism and the understanding of security, it is a fact that the notion of security, and in particular its more recent evolution, has been inspired and influenced by values intrinsic to the liberal view.

Two circumstances define the matrix of this relationship. On the one hand, the increasingly liberal nature of the political and strategic context and, on the other, the growing correlation and subordination of security to this context. There are also two aspects where this is particularly manifest and decisive.

One concerns the modern centrality of people in the security framework, either as actors or as an object. The second has to do with understanding security as an indispensable, permanent and very relevant public policy which, as such and to be entirely legitimate, lacks validation, regulation, scrutiny and inspection by society. The contemporary purposes of a security attentive to the human dimension, particularly oriented towards the political, economic and social dimensions of life, which in recent decades have been promoted, namely by the United Nations, are a clear paradigm. This paradigm will be better served by a renewed multilateralism, associating all the actors of international society and covering the plurality of today's threats and risks.

Understanding, building and maintaining global security from this human perspective means choosing to have people at the centre of the action, to encourage freedom and inclusion and, consequently, to promote a fair and true peace.

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