

An Answer to War: Conflicts and Intervention in Contemporary International Relations

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In moral terms, the problem we face is that of the rights of others beyond our borders: not merely the moral rights of other states, which have been enshrined in international law for a long time, but the rights of other human beings, either as members of other communities or simply as human beings.

—Stanley Hoffman¹

1. Conflict at the End of the Twentieth Century

One is almost embarrassed at having to stress once again the depth and radical nature of the changes brought about by the year 1989, the historical defeat of Communism, the end of the Cold War. And yet it is from this still recent turning point, unforeseen and still far from being fully decanted, that a discourse on conflict must be begun.

In the first place, what has changed is the perception of a threat. We will not presume to interfere with historians as they debate up to which point the nuclear holocaust has ever constituted a real danger. What is certain, however, is that, both politically and psychologically, the counterposition of the two Superpowers in the field of nuclear armaments has contributed in a very fundamental way to determining the specific features of European (and in part, world) history throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It did so by determining alliances, marking borderlines, defining thresholds and activating "safety valves" not only for tensions between Moscow and Washington, but also for conflicts between others, even at times when such conflicts were played out in areas that were politically or geographically marginal.

If we want to ready ourselves for an understanding of the conflicts of our time, we will have to jettison the main bulk of the tools used for about half a century by the theory of conflict.

The risk that nuclear weapons may be used by someone somewhere has not disappeared, and may even be made more acute by proliferation. However, we should at last free ourselves from an obsessive fixation on the ghost of a World

War III. As we were anxiously waiting (ourselves in—nuclear—arms) for the dreaded coming of the nuclear barbarians, we did not lend sufficient attention to real wars, less apocalyptic but much more possible. For decades we expounded on “Megadead,” and now that we are facing thousands, tens and hundreds of thousands of real dead, we find ourselves lacking a state-of-the-art, interdisciplinary culture of conflict capable of helping us understand and react.

One of the main reasons is that during the Cold War years the study of peace and war advanced mainly in the barren and disembodied terrains of technology, at times drifting into virtual reality. The discourse was disproportionately focused on the instruments of conflict: their number, their type, their possible uses and effects. Weapons held the center stage to the detriment of politics and history, the values and interests of men, both leaders and peoples. We will certainly not endorse the captious and disingenuous slogan of the NRA: “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” And yet even those who favor the control and limitation of the production and commerce of arms should have the intellectual honesty to admit that the slogan embodies a minimum of truth. How could we do otherwise when we have just witnessed the extermination in Rwanda, with machetes, of the equivalent in victims of at least seven Hiroshima-type nuclear bombs? Leaving aside games theory and the theology of deterrence we should at last focus our attention upon a real subject, on the mechanisms that bring about conflict and on those that can prevent it or stop it once it has started.

Another distortion typical of the study of conflict during the Cold War is the product of the systemic view that led inevitably, when considering any conflict, anywhere, to ask “who is behind it?” The planetwide confrontation of the two systems made such a question plausible, though not necessarily—and not invariably—well founded. What is true is that lingering on it today means losing precious time. It is banal and tautological, maintaining that those who have power exert it by the very fact of existing and moving (or even refraining from moving) on the international scene. It is quite a different thing, however, to interpret the clash among Somali clans or Rwandan ethnic groups in a mainly external key, be it neoimperial or neocolonial.

The fact is that inserting each individual conflict in the framework of the Great Confrontation was not only a handy key to understanding their causes, but also pointed at a path leading to their management and settlement. In the end, be it the Suez War in 1956 or the War in Vietnam, someone “was in charge,” someone supplied military balance, diplomatic support, negotiated “ways out.”

Today we live instead in a world that, when we speak of conflicts, is impressively polycentric and pluralistic. For decades many have hoped that someday we would overcome the division of the world in two opposed camps, the overbearing interference of the two Superpowers in the affairs of countries, peoples, ethnic groups, and political movements. Now, with a “regionalized” Russia and the U.S. as an evermore reluctant hegemonic power, one remembers what Saint Theresa had to say about answered prayers as being those apt to generate the bitterest of tears.

Irreconcilable claims of all sorts, nationalist obsessions, ethnic paranoias, demen-
tial fundamentalisms² reach the threshold of armed conflict without anyone (once
the mobilizing effect of the Cold War is over) being willing to spend money or risk
lives in order to prevent or stop the clash.

We will definitely not indulge in an obscene nostalgia for the good old days of
the Cold War, and yet we are forced to live in a "postmodern" world that has been
deprived of a handy interpretative tool and of an arbitrary but real international
governance. We are all orphans of the Cold War, but instead of weeping the not-
so-dear deceased we should try to grow up.

Focusing on the quantity of conflicts, on their pluralism, is important, but it
cannot by itself supply the full measure of the problems we are facing in this
disconcerting end of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, the most disturbing
feature is not the quantity, but the quality of present-day conflicts.

The term "war," indicating "organized violence carried on by political units
against each other"³ turns out not to be sophisticated enough to account for an
important differentiation between two different types of conflict. The Greeks, for
example—and especially Plato in *The Republic*—referred to organized violence
using two different terms: *stasis*, i.e., a conflict between groups mutually recognizing
a basic affinity, though seeking to solve by force a divergence of interests; and
polemos, i.e., total war against the totally "Other," the barbarian, the threatening
stranger, the alien.⁴

It is a fact that instruments created to prevent, limit for humanitarian purposes,
or settle conflicts (from consuetudinary and treaty-based international law to the
UN Charter) were developed by the international community with reference to
war/*stasis*, and not to war/*polemos*, the latter not recognizing, by definition, either
rules or limits. Thus it is false that, as critics often maintain, those instruments
are invariably useless or ineffective.

Let us take a rather recent case: the war for the Falklands/Malvinas. It was a
real war with many dead, and with the utilization of modern and lethal military
hardware. Yet in carrying out this particular war, both the Argentinians and the
British showed that their aim was neither the extermination nor the total crushing
of the adversary. It was clearly a test of force with a very specific object performed
by two subjects showing, even as they were fighting, that they were fully aware of
the fact that after the war there would again be coexistence, relationship, mutual
recognition. Hence the respect of certain self-limitations, rules of the game, interna-
tionally recognized norms (be it for the respect of noncombatants or the treatment
of prisoners of war).

The problem is that such a kind of conflict is today the exception, not the rule.
The rule is the proliferation of wars/*polemos*. And the real tragedy is that, contrary
to what was true in ancient Greece, today the enemy is no longer the barbarian
with an unusual appearance and an incomprehensible language, but literally (see
former Yugoslavia or Rwanda) the next-door neighbor. It is indeed the neighbor
that is to be identified as a threat to one's survival and identity. It is the neighbor that

must be either forcibly removed or exterminated, with no space for compromise, coexistence, compassion, or respect for limits or rules in the clash.⁵

One may be tempted to maintain that, today as well as in the past, civil wars are invariably conducive to the concept of *polemos*, with its load of totality and ferociousness. But it is hardly so: the American Civil War—a wide, prolonged, bitter conflict—was basically fought as a war/*stasis*. Suffice it to say that it was during that very conflict that the foundations of what was later to be called international humanitarian law were laid.⁶ Alternatively, one could suggest a differentiation between countries and cultures conceiving conflict in the former or in the latter variant: i.e., as a death struggle deprived of all rules or rather as a confrontation that is violent but limited both in its means and in its goals (the defeat, not the annihilation of the enemy). But history does not allow us to sustain this hypothesis either. The same country (Germany) in the same conflict (World War II) behaved vis-à-vis two enemies (allied between themselves) according to two different concepts of conflict: *stasis* on the Western front (as shown by the treatment of allied prisoners of war, as well as by the murky, but historically factual, attempts at a separated, negotiated peace) and *polemos* on the Eastern front (here too the treatment of Russian war prisoners, of which hundreds of thousands were starved to death in captivity, is revealing).

What is then the origin of this phenomenon, definitively not a new one as far as its roots are concerned, but ominously new for the breadth of its proliferation?

A methodological footnote is in order here. One would hope that the intellectual dominance of single-factor theories is at last waning. All the more so in a field such as the study of conflict (international and noninternational), one of the most complex due to the multiplicity and variety of factors at play, and where only a multidisciplinary approach and multicausal hypothesis can help us understand. We must at last rid ourselves of artificial dichotomies such as economics versus politics, ethics versus interests, diplomacy versus use of military means, internal versus international aspects: conflicts must be examined simultaneously under all these angles.

Turning now to the specific case of the kind of conflict characterizing our time, we see that the inevitable interaction between socioeconomic and politico-cultural factors unfolds in profoundly differentiated patterns according to different situations, geographical realities, levels of development, cultures.

For example, the conflict between Serbs and Moslems in Bosnia does not have the same causes (thus it does not demand the same "treatment") as the confrontation between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi. But let us linger on these two so-called ethnic conflicts.

In the first place one has to reject the fatalistic pseudorealism of those who maintain that for certain peoples and certain ethnic groups—be it the Serbs or the Hutus—violence is more "normal" than coexistence. We must reject it not only because it is a more or less consciously racist statement, but also because it is a false one. History, even in the bloody Balkans, supplies evidence of alternating

periods of coexistence and conflict, as matter of fact the former usually longer than the latter. Were it not so one could not account for the formation and the duration throughout several centuries of complex multiethnic communities. If today someone is trying to enforce ethnic cleansing it is indeed because groups coexisted for a long time, living together in the same territory. Who said, and on which grounds, that multiethnic coexistence is less "natural" than ethnic conflict? Can we not suspect the opposite to be true, so that only violence can separate what naturally tends to mix?⁷

And yet, we must make an effort to understand the roots of these conflicts.

In the first place, we must say that there are *also* material, socioeconomic causes. Let us take Rwanda. A Senagalese international civil servant, with extended experience in the country, wrote after the tragedy: "This small country, with the highest demographic density in Africa, is characterized by the most extreme proximity among its inhabitants. Yet individualism is sovereign, and fear of the other marks daily life."⁸ African reality in general is often defined by a severe lack of resources and by a deep imbalance in person-to-land, person-to-environment ratio.⁹ Such an imbalance creates situations that are "zero-sum," or can be presented as such by reckless and criminal political leaders. Given these premises, conflict becomes a paroxysmal and anomic clash described by the awful saying *mors tua, vita mea*, and that Hobbes rather than Clausewitz can help us understand.

And yet even in this instance what we are confronted with is neither "natural" nor automatic. Conflict between groups remains in the realm of politics, and not in that of nature, such as the mutual aggression among rats confined in ever more cramped spaces. What is needed to spark the conflict is a detonator: the "ethnic lie." If one wants the next-door neighbor to be considered as a threatening alien (to be exterminated before he exterminates you) the first step is describing him as such, exasperating the elements that make him different, or inventing them if they do not exist.¹⁰ We detect here a task for intellectuals and propaganda workers, for the creators of positive myths about one's own group and of negative myths regarding the neighbor/rival. Such a process is very clear in the case of the Hutu-Tutsi confrontation.

Let us quote the General Secretary of "Medecins sans frontieres," Alain Destexhe:

"When the colonizers arrived, there were groups, social entities distinguished from the others, but differences were not perceived in the guise of ethnic groups or races. Building stereotypes and supporting one group against the other, the colonizers contributed to the reinforcement, structuring and heightening of separate identities. After independence, such categories have been strengthened every time rulers have tried to overcome a politically difficult phase by exasperating the ethnic issue. What is true is that, though the Hutu-Tutsi confrontation does not coincide with a true ethnic differentiation, it has been assumed by the population as a whole, and has therefore become politically relevant."¹¹ Thus in Rwanda "human beings have destroyed each other in a conflict belonging to other times in the name of a fiction."¹² In other words, it is not enough, in order to account for

genocide, to recur to history (Tutsi feudal power over which colonizers implanted their power and their administration), sociology (Tutsi herdsmen against Hutu peasants), economics (a country with dwindling resources subject to strong demographic pressures). These factors are only premises, and the same factors could have led to completely different outcomes if one had embarked on a different political path. What is still missing, in order to explain the tragedy, is the role of party and government leaders, of intellectuals, of media (in the first place the sinister "*Radio milles collines*"). Here too, when facing a specific case of conflict in which the degree of "material determination" is highest, naturalism and fatalism are absurd, if not suspect.

Even more blatantly absurd is a pseudo-realist interpretation on the inevitability of conflict in former Yugoslavia, and especially in Bosnia. Here the "material foundations" of conflict are even more flimsy than those applicable in the case of African conflicts. Here, on the contrary, we are in the realm of unabashedly creative politics. Bosnia: an ethnically homogeneous population (all Slavs), with the same language, and with religious-cultural differences that are not more marked than those existing between a Protestant of the Piedmontese valleys and a Palermo Catholic living together in the city of Turin. The only real difference, one which served as the starting point for a deliberate political project, is that between the city and the countryside: a sociocultural difference with political undertones on which was artificially superimposed a would-be ethnic mold. In a way, a sort of grotesque caricature of Lin Piao's vision of countryside-versus-cities: in this specific case, closed, sectarian, authoritarian countryside against open, multiethnic, cosmopolitan, democratic city.

2. An Answer to Conflict: The Issue of Intervention

We said that an analysis of conflict in our times can only be interdisciplinary. By the same token, the same interdisciplinary approach must preside over the search for a strategy aimed at preventing conflicts, at subjecting to rules and limitations those that break out, at stopping them.

But first we must make an effort at philosophical, and not merely terminological, exactitude. Conflict means, in this context, armed and organized violence. It does not refer to any divergence, radical opposition, dissent, dissonance. Paradoxically, the dream of eliminating not only war, but all conflict in the sense of contrast, rivalry, disharmony, has constituted, historically, one of the main roots of armed and organized violence. The utopia of ridding humanity of all conflict and contrast, of a "final solution of the political problem" has generated horrible wars-to-end-all-wars, sinister dictatorships meant to introduce the kingdom of freedom and harmony.

Every people, every group, has a precise and inescapable responsibility to embark on the path of coexistence instead of that of conflict. But having stated this self-

evident principle, we cannot pretend we do not see its limits. In the first place, responsibility is directly linked to power (a commodity that, as is well known, is not equitably distributed among countries, peoples, groups). Secondly, washing our hands of alien responsibility does not seem to make much ethical or political sense.

On first sight, the "disconnection" between different crises brought about by the end of the unifying function of the Cold War may justify the belief that we are sheltered from the consequences of limited conflicts. Indeed, if we apply strictly geopolitical criteria, it is hard to see why we should consider ourselves threatened by genocide in Rwanda, conflict in Chechnya, or by war in Bosnia unless we happen to live in those unhappy places. Actually, wars are all near, thanks to CNN, but all equally distant insofar as the fact that they do not affect our daily lives. Today a citizen of Trieste may be morally and psychologically shaken by the war in Bosnia (distant only a few hundred miles), but does not feel more menaced than a resident of Washington's affluent Northwest section feels threatened by the piling up of murder statistics in the black areas of the city. And yet it is a mistake: that of believing that the negative effects of conflicts spread only by contiguous lines, as gangrene, whereas they spread the same way as blood poisoning. The very "blood" of the international community is being poisoned by the proliferation of "small wars." The defenses of the entire international organism are being weakened. Thus, in order to understand where our interest lies, in order to perceive the nature of the threat, to awaken our responsibility and prompt our action, we must not limit ourselves to measuring the repercussions of conflicts on international trade, lines of communications, refugee flows—but ask ourselves what will be the global effects of a creeping banalization/legitimization of the use of violence in the pursuit of the ends of more or less extended, more or less "historical" groups. In short, of the weakening of rules: both of those that tend to prevent conflict and of those that aim at regulating or limiting it for humanitarian ends. This is exactly what we are dealing with today.

A first level of action relates to the material conditions in which billions of people live. We should definitely refrain from drifting into the banal equation underdevelopment-conflict. We know of too many cases proving that conflict and violence can arise even without poverty and backwardness. We even know that the breach of previous solidarity, the fragmentation of previous political entities (the most frequent detonator of conflict) are often the work not of the most backward and poor, but of those who, from a position of relative advantage, feel they no longer want to share their destiny (especially in economic terms) with those who are more backward.

And yet how can one deny the linkage between poverty and reduction of the margins for compromise, struggle for scarce resources and temptation of *mors tua, vita mea*, social imbalance and readiness of entire social groups to identify an enemy, economic disorder and strength of demagogic and violent political leaders? Besides, it is hypocritical for Europeans to state that welfare does not eliminate conflict, when we know very well that a necessary, though not sufficient, condition