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Why is the world at war?

The question betrays a belief that war is an aberration, that the instruments of non-war – diplomacy, negotiation, compromise – have failed. At first sight this is understandable. We now live in a time of global, multi-dimensional, strategic crisis – a time of radical discontinuity known classically as the Interregnum, and defined by Antonio Gramsci as one in which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born [and] a vast variety of morbid symptoms appear.' Ostensibly, the period is transitional – hence the inferred proclamation of *justitium* from Roman antiquity – in which, though the old laws are suspended, there is the anticipation that new and different laws will be proclaimed by the emergent order.

What needs frequently to be repeated in these times of hope is that the international system is a study in violent instability. In the first instance, war, though currently prevalent, is seldom, if ever, the answer to whatever the original *casus belli* was and generally is deserving of Jay Winter's conclusion to his video series, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*:

> The war solved no problems. Its effects, both immediate and indirect, were either negative or disastrous. Morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its course, futile in its result . . .[1]

For all of that selective memory and amnesia accompany the commemorations of most such conflagrations. This is an enduring theme.

1 As cited in Library of Social Science Newsletter, "The Purpose of the First World War," https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/newsletter/posts/2017/2017-01-24-telos.html accessed 1 December 2024.

Foremost among the items misplaced by amnesia is the nature of politics in times of turmoil, and even in calmer times. It was Machiavelli who stated unequivocally that all politics is a state of war - and he was including international relations and domestic.

Centuries later, but with reverberations in the 2020s, the American historian Henry Adams, in his 1907 autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams wrote that:

> Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds . . .

Nor should this surprise. It is reflected in the existential reality of the international system and *raison d'etat*. By way of a philosophical gathering, the relevant and undeniable facts of that system are: [1] that civilisation itself is founded on violence; [2] that political collectivities which emphasise self-interest and collective egoism are inherently brutal; [3] that 'a nation is a group of people united by a common mistake regarding its origins and a collective hostility towards its neighbours'; [4] that nationalism is, ultimately, a 'community of blood'; [5] that we are all embedded in violence and, to a greater or lesser extent, benefit from it; and [6] that 'government is impossible without a religion – that is, without a body of common assumptions'.[2]

The proposition, then, is that efforts to understand the endemic nature of war are insufficiently engaged with the world of international politics / international relations as a dysfunctional realm in which cognitive dissonance is both the required and the operational emotional state of all those who aspire to change it. Put another way, they are not only required to normalise the need to hold contradictory beliefs and attitudes, and therefore to engage in contradictory behaviour, but also to interact with others in generically the same state but whose beliefs and behaviours will frequently contradict their own.

2 Although I assume these six features, they are not at all arbitrarily or capriciously chosen and for those wanting assurance through references to external works I have added the following: [1] accords with – indeed, is derived from Niebuhr (1932:xi); and I am deeply grateful to Dr Daniel Warner, formerly of the Graduate Institute of International Studies, and now Assistant Director for International Relations at the Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) for bringing it to my attention in a series of extraordinarily valuable, ongoing conversations in Geneva in August 2011 on the subject of humanitarianism and the tragic in the context of his research into, and analysis of the historical, political and theological contexts of the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Warner 2013: 3-28), and http://alt.sagepub.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/content/38/1/3.full.pdf+html, accessed 28 January 2015. [1], [3], [4] and [5] are extracted from one of the principal sources for this paper (Carolyn Marvin and David W Ingle 1999: 15, 27, and 312-313. [6], which expresses what to this writer is a significant truth is more accurately a direct quote from George Bernard Shaw (1923: 25). [3] originates with Karl W. Deutsch, but Shlomo Sand opens his study of Jewish nationalism with it (2008: 11).

The reason is straightforward. As Stanley Hoffman (1992) outlined the situation some thirty-our years ago, at the level of the system of states - and that mythical shapeshifter, the 'international community' – political leaders loudly proclaim four fundamental principles which are antithetical to each other.

These are that: state sovereignty is inviolable; nations and other collectivities of peoples have the right to self-determination; democratic politics within states is the best guarantee of international order; and the protection of human rights is universally agreed. International Relations has never resolved Hoffman's conundrum.

That said, the very best attempts provide exceptionally useful explanatory insights for part of the phenomena but definitely not all of it. To be acknowledged is Richard Ned Lebow's 2010 work, *Why nations fight;* it is truly deserving the status of a seminal work.

To explain, its significance, albeit injuriously and briefly, Lebow's analysis rejects the traditional wisdom that the amassing of power for the purpose of achieving security; instead he argues in favour of centralising honour (or esteem) and standing as the subjective and sufficient determinants of foreign and security policy objectives (which perforce include the decisions to go to war).[3]

The pursuit of standing – defined as both competitive achievement and being hailed as a valued partner or member on the basis of excellence in certain activities - by his analysis, is the leading cause of war and accounts for approximately 60 percent of the motivation for war; the traditional IR realist motivation of security for less than 20 percent (Lebow 2010: 97-127):

> Small and great powers often fail to undertake anything approaching a rational cost calculus before provoking or starting wars and Lebow documents the irrationality of decision making in numerous case studies.
>
> Actors, decision-makers, political leaders are frequently motivated by the drive for self-esteem which leads them to seek standing or revenge directly, or vicariously, through various political arrangements without undertaking a thoughtful assessment of the risks involved with this behavior.

3 It is helpful to see Lebow's work in the context of the debate it has engendered among prominent IR scholars and three such responses which the author found to be very interesting are cited here for that purpose, namely Robert Jervis, Richard K Betts and Edward Rhodes (all 2012). Lebow's response to these critics is also published in the same volume.

> Momentary passion, or what are termed irrational emotions or drives not empirically justifiable, but which are psychologically comforting, are neither abnormal nor, paradoxically, "irrational" because they arise from the different logics of rationality found in the pursuit of standing. (Lebow 2012: 365-366)

An earlier study related to the same question – in 1988 by Daniel S. Geller - points to the tragic made explicit in these conclusions. To interpolate his findings, once committed to a war, states forget the past and need to learn anew the costs it will involve. Wars, in any case, tend to be long and expensive in human terms, and wars fought by major powers are particularly long and particularly expensive. From which it follows that minor powers aligned with major powers share the risks and eventually the significant costs of conflicts that are, at root, derivations from a status that is beyond them.

If we recall Niebuhr's pessimism concerning political collectivities organised around the principles of self-interest and collective egoism, then the prospect is not only of inherent brutality, but of perpetual rivalries which can never be extinguished because there is a virtually infinite set of objects of desire which will require violent intervention, and which will be engulfed by the disposition to war.

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