



Between Realism and Idealism: The Contemporary Dilemma in Peace Debates

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Essay

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Abstract

This essay puts in perspective the traditional idea of Idealism as associated with Erasmus and Kant. Given the worsening of the relationship between USA, NATO, and West Europe, on one side, and Russia, China and North Korea, on the other side, one can think about a Second Cold War. Here, the author advocates a position which can be situated between Realism and Idealism. In this sense, the idea of "Utopian Realism", suggested by John Rawls (1921-2002) is taken as a possible way out between those opposite standings. To achieve this, the author analyses three scenarios: the withdrawal of US from Afghanistan (2021), the invasion of Ukraine by Russia (February 2022), and the Crimean War (1853-1856).

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The twin problems of individual survival and collective survival weren't resolved in a lasting manner by any civilization, and they could be solved, for good, by the international law empire or by a universal State. (...) As long as each collectivity is forced to think in its own salvation, and, at the same time, in the survival of the diplomatic system and of the human species, the diplomatic-strategical behavior won't be rationally determined, not even in theory.¹

1 Aron R, *Paz e guerra entra as nações*. Trans. Sérgio Bath. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2018, pp. 20-21.

Introduction

Since the beginning, Political Philosophy has been traditionally divided into the opposite fields of Realism and Idealism. It is not necessary to demonstrate this point here. Regarding my own intellectual path, I've studied authors that can, without further difficulty, be located into the field of Idealism – it is the case of Erasmus and Kant, for instance – or into the field of "utopian realism" – as is the case of Rawls.²

More recently, however, I've been concerned to introduce in my reflections more concrete data, based on history and in the analysis of contemporary international frame, in order to evaluate international relations, either in time of peace or in war time.

In this paper, then, I will try to apply Utopian Realism to the analysis of contemporary international scene. I choose

2 Luiz P. Rouanet, "À Paz perpétua – Estudo sobre o pensamento político de Kant", Master Diss. São Paulo: FFLCH-USP, 1985; "O enigma e o espelho –

Uma análise dos discursos sobre a paz de Erasmo e Rawls", PhD Thesis. São Paulo: FFLCH-USP, 2000; *Paz, justiça e tolerância no mundo contemporâneo*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2010.

as study cases the withdrawal of USA from Afghanistan, which took place on August 31st, 2021, and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, on February 24th, 2022. I also will look on a precedent of the War of Ukraine, found in the Crimean War (1853-1856).

I want to sketch here the idea that we need to go beyond classical references or Modern framework. We need to get in touch with what contemporary analysts have been studying, in concrete cases, and going beyond philosophy: we must employ sociological, historical, economical, and other available tools.

Kant used to say that, if we look to history with purely empirical eyes, we will not see any progress: men still slaughter each other, as they did before. After the two World Wars in XX Century, the genocides and pogroms, the introduction of nuclear weapons, I would say that they kill even more nowadays.

That's why Kant introduces "marks" from the past, the present and the future indicating that mankind reaches a progress, even if relative. In this sense, French Revolution comes to mind, as a proof of what can people do to throw away the chains of tyranny. After 1789, the Monarchy never retrieved its status; it came back, but not with the same strength, without the absolute power of the time of Louis XIV.

Another mark is the abolition of slavery. Brazil was the last country to end it, in 1888, and, since then, even if slavery still exists in many disguised forms, and sometimes not so disguised, the idea of slave labor lost the battle, historically: today, no country, no State, dares to defend, openly at least, this infamous mode of production.

In this way, Kant introduces an idealist perspective concerning international relations, position which he sustains, more to the point, in *To perpetual peace (ZeF)*.

John Rawls, in *The Law of Peoples* (1999), introduces the notion of "Utopian Realism". I would like to defend, in this paper, the application of this form of Realism, in which we start from the effective conditions – the Realism – but not getting rid of the ideals – the Utopy. In Rawls's words: "Political philosophy is realistically Utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought of as the limits of practical political possibility".³

Rawls articulates his essay around the notion of Utopian realism. His wider goal consists in conciliate the liberalism of the "well-ordered liberal societies" with other forms of

reasonable or "decent" societies. Here, I will try to think Utopian realism in slightly different terms, as a kind of compromise between realism and idealism, concerning international affairs.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan

On August 31, 2021, USA completed the withdrawal of their troops in Afghanistan, in what was the longest intervention of the country abroad⁴. Differently of what is informed in this article, the US intervention in Afghanistan begun only in 2003, two years after the attack to the Twin Towers in NY, on September 9, 2001, a date no one can forget and which indicated the very beginning of XXI Century.⁵ The reaction was retarded. The first target was the Saddam Hussein's Iraq, fulfilling the operation initiated by President Georg Bush Senior in the so-called 1st Golf War.

It is not my objective here to remind well known facts but to start from them to analyze the contemporary international scene.

A recent essay furnishes a broad view of the late US interventions, since the war of Bosnia and Kosovo.⁶ It shows as, starting with an erroneous interpretation of what occurred in the War of Bosnia, American strategists tried to do the same in Iraq and Afghanistan, with a final disastrous result. According to the author, well-succeeded has been a "light footprint", which wasn't duly taken in account in later experiences. Instead of a massive investment in terms of troops, equipment, training, and money, better results were displayed by a program of valuing and supporting local populations, leading them to solve in their own terms their problems.

The decision of withdrawing American troops in Afghanistan, taken by Donald Trump administration and accomplished by President Joe Biden, can have disastrous consequences in the future. Rationally, however, it is justified by the fear of diplomatic moves by China – i.e., the geopolitical and economical interest of continental China. US is forced to retreat to focus in the most powerful enemy – not to mention the ever-present threat of Putin's Russia. We would be at the threshold of a new Cold War, as pointed by some analysts.

As put the author at the end of his essay:

President Joe Biden has followed Trump's Afghan policy

⁴ <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2021/08/30/eua-concluem-retirada-das-tropas-do-afeganistao.ghtml>. Access in 17/11/2021.

⁵ Luiz P. Rouanet, "Paz, justiça e tolerância no mundo contemporâneo", in Revista de História, 2000, republicado em Luiz P. Rouanet, *Paz, justiça e tolerância no mundo contemporâneo*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2010.

⁶ Rory Stewart, "The last days of intervention – Afghanistan and the delusions of maximalism". *Foreign Affairs*, nov./dez. 2021.

³ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, New York: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 6.

in every detail, despite having famously advocated a light footprint—and argued against the surge—when he was Obama’s vice president. Somehow, over the years, he seems to have convinced himself that such an approach had failed. But the light footprint did not fail. What failed was the political culture of the West and the imagination of Western bureaucrats. The United States and its allies lacked the patience, realism, and moderation needed to find the middle path.⁷

A New Cold War?

The recent escalate of the conflict at the border of Russia and Ukraine, which places, in one side, NATO plus USA and West Europe, and in the other side, Russia and China, shows that Post-Cold War scene has been modified. This can take us to think in a “new Cold War”.⁸ The “Putin Doctrine”, as said by Angela Stent, has been spread by the Russian President himself, in an essay titled “About the historical unity between Russia and Ukraine”. In this paper, disseminated among Russian troops, Putin argues that Russia and Ukraine were set apart after the falling of Soviet Union, in 1991, due to the weakness of the government at that time, but that now it is necessary to reunite these countries. According to the author,

The core element of this doctrine is getting the West to treat Russia as if it were the Soviet Union, a power to be respected and feared, with special rights in its neighborhood and a voice in every serious international matter. The doctrine holds that only a few states should have this kind of authority, along with complete sovereignty, and that others must bow to their wishes. It entails defending incumbent authoritarian regimes and undermining democracies. And the doctrine is tied together by Putin’s overarching aim: reversing the consequences of the Soviet collapse, splitting the transatlantic alliance, and renegotiating the geographic settlement that ended the Cold War.⁹

China, on the other side, also with hegemonical aspirations, supports Russia because it is in the same situation of Russia regarding Taiwan. China doesn’t want West interfering in the case she decides to invade Taiwan – which seems unlikely, for now. Notwithstanding, if Russia is well-succeeded in her expansionist pretentions, China could

take this step. Consequently, what we see in the moment I write, is a kind of push and retreat strategy with the goal of testing the limits and the capacity of the West to the expansionist aspirations of both States, China, and Russia.

The Crimean War

The War of Ukraine, no matter how we look at it, seems anachronical. It is a conventional war in a time of nuclear weapons. It is a war of conquering in the middle of the XXI Century. Does Putin really believe that he can win that war and dominate the region? Even if Putin has a military victory, which doesn’t seem likely, he will not succeed in maintaining the conquered territories without the loss of many Russian soldiers, who will be killed by guerrilla and other form of fighting back that could be employed by defeated Ukrainian nationalists.

In many aspects, the War of Ukraine reminds us the Crimean War, a bloody war which foreshadowed First World War. It was also, and for the first time, I guess, a trench war. The trenches were constructed during the long siege of Sebastopol. There were also bombing of civilian population, and ethnic extermination. According to Orlando Figes, “Along all the coast of Black Sea, the Crimean War resulted in disentanglement and transmigration of ethnic and religious groups”.¹⁰ The Tartars, for instance, were decimated, as also the Circassian Muslims: “In 1864, the Muslim population of Circassia had been totally eradicated”.¹¹

It is clear, however, that the allied potencies (Britain, France, Austria, which supported and were backed by Turkey) had geo-strategical interests in the zone. Fundamentally, they wanted to contain the Russian impetus for expansion, as well as to secure their own domination and influence. How much of this is different now, in 2022? If, on one side, the Russian action today is widely unjustified; on the other side, the States that compound the NATO, and their partners, have also their own interests there.

The issue of the loss of prestige by Russia can be seen in the essay written by Putin. After the end of Crimean War, and the Treaty of Paris, in the words of Figes,

Russia didn’t lose too much in terms of territory, but she was humiliated by the Treaty of Paris [as also would be Germany, by the Treaty of Versailles]. Besides the loss of the fleet of the Black Sea and Bessarabia, she has lost the prestige which had in the so-called West Issue, since the XVIII Century.

7 Idem, *ibidem*.

8 “China apoia Putin em conflito contra Ocidente na Ucrânia”. *Jornal O Estado de São Paulo*, 28 de janeiro de 2022, p. A14. Cf. Angela Stent, “The Putin Doctrine”. *Foreign Affairs*, 27 de Janeiro de 2022: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-27/putin-doctrine>. Read in 27/01/2022.

9 Angela Stent, art. cit.:

10 O. Figes, *Crimeia – A história da guerra que redesenhou o mapa da Europa no século XIX*. Trad. Alexandre Martins. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2019, p. 443.

11 Idem, p. 444.

Russia only retrieved the position of dominance in Europe after 1945.¹²

So, to understand Putin's war it is necessary to go back not to the Cold War, but to the Crimean War, in XIX Century, which was, in turn, the prelude for IWW. The Russian Revolution was, maybe, the later result of the Crimean War, with its contempt for the soldiers, especially with the serfs, the people who lived in a state of semi-slavery in Russia.¹³ Tolstoy, who participated as soldier officer in the Crimean War, and was present at the siege of Sebastopol, criticizes the treatment given to the Russian soldiers, and, in a manner, vaticinates that this men, one day, would fight, exploding, and adds: "and, oh Lord, what kind of horrors wait for our society in the case this happens".¹⁴

Utopian realism

Now, I would like to explore the notion of Utopian realism, beginning with the definition given by Rawls, already quoted: "Political philosophy is realistically Utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought of as the limits of practical political possibility."

What is certain is that we cannot remain in the level of the mere ideals. However, even if ideas can and must serve as "treading lines of reason" people live and die for concrete issues, by bullets and real weapons. Even having in mind, in the long term, an universal peace, its realization is very far, and the people won't live enough to see it accomplished. We could almost repeat the joke by Leibniz, about the "peace of cemeteries" as the only perpetual peace.¹⁵

It is not the case to get back to the particularism of a Herder, for instance. We need only to begin from reality, not giving away the long-term objectives of an universal peace by means of a Federation of States, as suggested by Kant, or of Peoples, as suggested by Rawls.

In the cases we analyzed, one already concluded, the withdrawal of US from Afghanistan, the other still running, the War between Russia and Ukraine, I will try to extract some guidelines that allow us to think in a future peace.

At the first place, in the case of US withdrawal, this action seems to be justified for some reasons, and I mention two of them:

1. It is not possible to maintain for an undefined period an

army in foreigner and hostile territory.

2. The withdrawal was necessary as a kind of strategical retreat, to face the dominant potencies, China, and Russia.

So, to preserve the balance and force equilibrium, USA were obliged to make a strategical retreat. If they insisted staying in Afghanistan, they would be weakened, which would, in turn, be an invitation to these hostile potencies to make steps, widening their positions.

Concerning the war between Russia and Ukraine or, more to the point, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which is still developing, the NATO and the States of the West cannot allow an unlimited expansion of Russia: they need to show more resistance, cohesion, and capacity of retaliation, unless they want to watch Russia widen her territorial aspirations. It is necessary to tell Russia: *nec plus ultra*.

To be sure, in a frame in which there are countries equipped with nuclear weapons, with capacity of planetary destruction, the things cannot be put anymore in the terms which involved only, or mainly, conventional weapons. Even if the nuclear weapons remain as mere threats with power of dissuasion the mere idea that they can effectively be put in use creates terror and justified fear.

The goal of war is not to continue war, but to reach peace, even if provisory. As says Raymond Aron,

If we admit that no one desire war for itself, we'll accept that the belligerent who states the conditions of peace at the end of hostilities want to create conditions such that he can maintain the leverages obtained by weapons and do not need to engage again in a near future.¹⁶

Final remarks

I believe that in this paper I'm taking a new path in my research. Until now it has been characterized by an Idealist approach. The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia seems to put in jeopardy the advances obtained since the publishing of *To perpetual peace*, by Kant (1795), and the efforts for the creation, first, of the League of Nations, in 1919, and after that, of ONU, in 1948.

How to think of peace? ONU and NATO will be obliged to rethink their strategies. How to contain militarily a nuclear power-State can be the central issue.

It is necessary to evaluate case by case, in a concrete manner, as I tried to do here, first in the case of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, second, in the invasion of Ukraine by

12 Idem, p. 460.

13 Gogol, *Dead Souls*. Penguin (New York 2004).

14 Tolstoy, *apud* Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 463.

15 Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, Zef, 343.

16 Raymond Aron, *Paz e guerra entre as nações*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

Russia, and finally, in the case of Crimean War, seen as antecedent of the second.

I have no answers, of course. But I know that is no longer possible to adopt a purely idealistic line of thought, as was the case of Kant. The Utopian realism, of John Rawls, can be a way out, but it is still necessary to explore better how to apply it in the field of international affairs. We must explore further what said Rawls in his *The Law of Peoples*.

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