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# causes of war

the struggle for recognition

Thomas Lindemann



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## chapter | the struggle for recognition in two | international relations

A consideration of symbolic interests as causes of war constitutes a rediscovery of an old tradition more attentive to the non-utilitarian aspects of human motivations.<sup>1</sup> Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) had stressed that fear and honour were the causes of war. The Spartans' values and self-esteem were inextricably related to the questions of glory and prestige. Accordingly, they considered their honour ridiculed by Athenian actions and even more so by the reproach that was addressed to them from their allies to surrender to the Athenians, Potidaea and Megara without resistance. Finally, the Corinthian leaders' strategically appealed to Spartan honour and to feelings of guilt, which produced the desired effect. Thucydides also demonstrates that for weaker actors, honour can take precedence over physical survival. During the Peloponnesian War, Melians preferred extermination to capitulation. Up against the Athenians laying claim to the law of the strongest, the Melians opposed the force of 'justice':

Thus, for we who are still free, what spinelessness, what cowardice to not at all to attempt to avoid the servitude [...] We as well, we believe it difficult, do not doubt it, to fight at the same time, with unequal forces, against your power and against riches; but, on the side of fortune, we have strong hope, with the protection of the gods, to be not inferior to you, in defending sacred rights against injustice. (Thucydides 2000)

This resistance cost them dearly because the Athenians

put to death all those Melians that they captured and which were of military age; as for the children and the women they made slaves of them'.

Thomas Hobbes, considered as a precursor to realism, had quoted in his *Leviathan* three reasons for war: profit, which corresponds to the liberal perspective, security, which is at the crux of realistic reasoning, and *reputation*.<sup>2</sup> The Italian philosopher G. Vico accordingly identifies 'wild pride' as a major reason for war and for mankind's destructive forces in his work entitled *Principi di una scienza nuova*, published in 1725 (Boltanski, Thévenot 1991: 18).

### *Precursor*

Among the precursors to the study of the symbolic aspects of war, it is especially appropriate to quote Carl von Clausewitz. His work, *On War* (1832) is often interpreted as a model of 'controlled and limited war' (Clausewitz 1955; Aron 1976). According to Raymond Aron or more recently, Martin van Creveld, Clausewitz perceives war only as a means to political ends. War is portrayed as an *object* that

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1. For a presentation on international relations 'philosophers': Battistella (2003).

2. See on this subject: Battistella (2006).

is interrelated through political decision makers' intelligence. Considering that a war's finality is more often or not limited – the possession of an unspecified object (territory, economic resources, prestige) – they deem that wars always amount to a 'cold' violence. More recent interpretations such as those of Emmanuel Terray, Herfried Münkler, Hew Strachan or Andreas Herberg Rothe remind us of the existence of another Clausewitz more responsive to the thesis of the *war-subject*, or in other words, the 'existential war' (Terray 1999; Münkler 2002; Herberg Rothe 2007). First, Clausewitz does not exclude war that is led predominately by 'passion' and in particular hatred: 'Each battle is an expression of animosity. This instinct also manifests itself during the unfolding of the battle' (Clausewitz 1959). Hatred is inseparably related to the recognition problematic. It is often founded on the perception that others have treated me badly. Moreover, hatred has a psychological function of restoring one's self-esteem while making others responsible for any misfortunes. Lastly, hatred against the *out-group* strengthens the sentiment of identity; the *in-group* (Beck 2000).

In Clausewitz's work, hatred is a central concept. The possession of an unspecified 'material' object for him is one finality among others in armed conflicts.<sup>3</sup> He puts emphasis on the fact that the limitation of violence corresponds to a hostile intention (*feindliche Absicht*), but which implies the weakness of 'the hostile feeling' (*feindliches Gefühl*). He even acknowledges that the power of hostile sentiments can be such that political considerations are completely absent in the lead-up to war (Clausewitz 1959). In this eventuality, war naturally progresses towards its 'absolute' form. The objective of a war of 'passion' is to eliminate that which constitutes an 'identity threat' for the actor. The mobilisation of hostile feelings in a war is by no means an 'archaism', but it is effective to motivate armed forces to engage with ardour in armed confrontation. It is often the protagonist who is more motivated, and not necessarily the strongest, who wins the war. According to Clausewitz, even the most 'instrumental' war requires a minimal amount of animosity. On a number of occasions, Clausewitz recalls that the quest for glory (recognition of superiority) and for honour (equal dignity) are powerful motivations in armed confrontations. He also affirms that one should not underestimate 'the desire to strike back and to avenge' in combat.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that a war – even lost – is preferable to dishonour. Thus, in 1812 he writes in a memoir to General Scharnhorst that a lost, but 'honourable' battle, is essential for Prussia in order to preserve its identity and to save its chance of rebirth:

One humiliates oneself and the nation when by fear one takes part in a government which is our biggest enemy [...] and who has treated us badly to the extreme. I believe and I strongly state, that nothing must be more sacred for

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3. See on this subject Clausewitz, *Théorie du combat*, p. 25: 1. The destruction of the enemy forces, 2. The possession of an unspecified object, 3. A simple victory for the honour of arms, 4. Several or the three objectives together.

4. Clausewitz (1998) Book 8, Chapter 7.

a people than the freedom of its existence.<sup>5</sup>

All in all, the importance that Clausewitz places on moral forces in war contradicts a purely utilitarian interpretation of his work. For him, war for purely strategic or economic ends is far from being the rule. Such wars assume the absence of hostile feelings and the implicit mutual recognition of the protagonists as ‘autonomous’ actors in a ‘duel’, meaning that their opposition is as rivals, but not as enemies.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE RECOGNITION PROBLEMATIC IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

The ‘symbolic’ motivation at the start of war was also mentioned by classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and R. Aron<sup>7</sup> under the designation of ‘prestige’ or ‘glory’. However, traditional analyses of war made ‘prestige’ a constant variable in political officials’ behaviour without really taking into account the historical variation of the values associated with prestige and glory. Thus, a ‘civilised’ society such as the ex-FRG does not value ‘violent’ behaviour *vis-à-vis* minor provocations, contrary to martial societies like that of Prussia.

#### Can the state be ‘offended’?

The transposition of the concept of recognition to interstate relations can appear problematic. Does not such an approach result from an abusive ‘personalisation’ of the state?<sup>8</sup> Why should state decision makers feel ‘offended’ when non-recognition is directed at the political entity and not at the person? Only people and not states have a ‘need for affection’ or for self-esteem.<sup>9</sup> Behaviour of contempt towards a state, such as the refusal to let the state be integrated into the international community as well as stigmatisation, rhetorical depreciation or severe punishment within the framework of a peace treaty against the state are not comparable to insults against particular people. Is it really conceivable that political decision makers are outraged by the ‘humiliation’ of an abstract entity to such a point that they resort to armed force? Moreover, is it not true that ‘bureaucratic’ and decisional logics inside democratic political entities obligate political decision makers to contend with a multitude of political forces? Such a pluralist configuration of power channels the ‘anger’ provoked by insults.

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5. Quoted by Einsel (2006), ‘Man würdigt sich und die Nation herab, indem man aus Furchtsamkeit für eine Regierung streitet, die unser ärgster Feind ist, uns unsere Grösse beraubt und misshandelt hat aufs Äusserste. Ich glaube und bekenne, dass ein Volk nicht für höher zu achten hat, als die Würde und Frieheit seines Daseins’.
  6. Rothe (2007) p. 106: ‘This symmetry brings with it a tendency to justify wars, but it has other consequences as well. It includes a recognition in principle that one’s opponent is *iustus hostis* – an equal – so the enemy is no longer considered a criminal’.
  7. See on this subject: Aron (1984: 81–103). Also see: Roche (2005:110 sq).
  8. I owe this objection to Heins, V. and to A. Honneth during a discussion of my presentation of ‘War for Recognition’ at the *l’Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt A.M., July 9, 2007.
  9. I owe this observation to a suggestion made by Heins, V.

A strong argument against this objection is the ‘affective’ and even the ‘identity’ value that an abstract institutional entity – even if it is highly ‘fictitious’ – can possess for officials of such an institution. Emotional dynamics initiated by an act of contempt against a state are far from being negligible. The founding references of groups, such as religious beliefs – constitute an ‘emotionally invested commodity’ (Braud 2007). The image of the nation (the national symbol) can be of extraordinary importance for an individual and can even become the object ‘of a totemic cult’ (Boulding 1965: 110*f.*). Whether it is the issue of ‘patriotic’ suicides following the Franco-German war (1871), the ‘humiliation of Versailles’ for German nationalists after the First World War, the collapse of the *World Trade Centre* (11th September, 2001) or the ‘blasphemy’ of the caricatures of Mohammed (2006), the indignation generated by the disrespect of identity references is often very real. The growing individualisation of Western societies does not make them completely indifferent to attacks on their collective symbols as American patriotism illustrated after the 11th September.

The ‘affective’ burden associated with the symbols of collective identity is particularly important for political officials of a state entity. In order for an individual to be able to embrace a role such as that of Minister of Defence or even that of government leader, it is necessary for him to be identified, at least partially, with the institution which confers this role to him. The identification of a political official with his ‘state’ is all the more probable given that the prestige associated with the institution strongly influences his personal prestige. When the President of the French Republic defends France’s standing in the world, he fights at the same time for personal respect that other heads of state convey to him. The loss of a nation’s prestige – which was the case for France after the Second World War – involves the depreciation of its leaders. Thus, General de Gaulle had trouble being accepted as an official spokesperson during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945. Furthermore, organisational studies – for example, those on armed forces – have for a long time recognised that not only ‘autonomy’ and ‘resources’ are at stake in ‘corporatist’ warfare, but also ‘organisational prestige’.

Undoubtedly, the ‘transposition’ of the recognition problematic into international relations on ethical questions<sup>10</sup> poses the most problems. State recognition can imply the contempt of its populations when they are exposed to political, cultural and economic discrimination on behalf of the central power. Such *dilemmas of recognition* are frequent in an international community where only a small minority of states grant ‘equal dignity’ to the whole of their populations. Despite this, one cannot reasonably push aside the ‘ethical’ duty to respect the symbols of the collective identity of a population.

### **The state and the role of emotions in the quest for recognition**

Another objection asserts that political decision makers in ‘modern’ democracies should be too strongly inserted in a bureaucratic process to succumb to emotional dynamics and to be concerned with attacks on the symbolic integrity of their

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10. See on this subject: Heins, V. (2006).

## chapter | losing the war, but winning three | respect?

The stability of an international system is the most frequently assessed with regard to the distribution of material capabilities, namely within great powers or the degree of institutional and economic interdependence (Dehio 1959; Waltz 1979; Aron 1984; Morgenthau 1985; Carr 2002). Certain realist analyses state that the decline of a benevolent hegemony, such as Great Britain in the nineteenth century, leads to the multiplication of armed conflict (Kugler and Zagare 1990; Gilpin 1981; 1989; Organski and Kugler 1980). Current discussions on the vices and virtues of American hegemony or American ‘hyper-power’ (H. Védrine) prolong this tradition, favouring the study of material forces rather than the meaning that actors themselves give to it. The theory of hegemonic stability directs our attention to the peacefully dissuasive elements of a hegemonic power (Gilpin 1981; Organski and Kugler 1980). This theory suggests that wars are avoided through strong disparities of power because weaker powers are aware that war would be fatal to them. In this respect, the nineteenth century *Pax Britannica* or the *Pax Americana* in Western Europe after the Second World War are cited as examples of pacifying hegemony.

My approach, in examining recognition, shows interest, above all, in terms of exercising hegemonic power. It investigates the role played by a hegemony’s identity in relation to other powers<sup>1</sup>, that is to say the compatibility of the exercise of power with a weaker power’s self-esteem. Where a realist would estimate that interstate war should be rare within the post-Cold War order, thanks to the imposing hegemony of American military power, an analysis sensitive to recognition themes could place serious doubts on this thesis. The stability of the international order will not depend only on the material capacities held by the hegemonic power, but also on its aptitude to include other powers in the international system and to avoid humiliating them. The fact that there exist states designated as forming part of an ‘Axis of Evil’ (President Bush in January 2002 regarding Iran, Iraq and North Korea) and that significant decisions, such as the American war against Iraq, were taken without the United Nations Security Council’s authority fuels feelings of resentment and exclusion; such is the case with Russia. The symbolic interest of maintaining a positive self-image may prevail over the search for ‘physical’ security. Resistance, even in suicidal forms, against the arrogant hegemonic power becomes understandable from the point of view of the desire ‘to be recognised’. As far as Saddam Hussein (1991 and 2003) and Slobodan Milosevic (1999) were concerned, their ‘honour’ prevailed over their desire for physical security in their opposition to the American super-power’s ‘diktat’.

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1. On identity and regional wars: Millner (2007: Ch.3).

The other realist variant, the theory of the balance of power, emphasises the costs for each potential belligerent and not only on those challenging hegemonic power. The balance of power does not automatically deter states headed by leaders who are more willing to give value to symbolic gains over physical security. War stemming from a balanced international system, such as the two World Wars is due to the fact that there are some powers that have hubristic identities. Equality between great powers is seen as being unbearable for the self image held by these hubristic powers. The European balance was guaranteed in 1939 however national-socialist Germany was willing to run huge risks in order to realise its ambition to become the leading nation in Europe and in the world. Likewise, it should not be forgotten that President Ahmadinejad's entourage prefers to have the prestigious status of being a nuclear power, albeit a potential one, over concrete military security.

The fact that state decision makers calculate the symbolic costs of a political option might also explain why states that have a significant superiority over their rivals do not systematically resort to armed force. From this perspective, peace-keeping at the time of the balance of terror might not only be due to the mutually assured destruction (MAD), but equally to the fact that the use of nuclear weapons was perceived after Nagasaki and Hiroshima as being morally reprehensible. The United States did not resort to using a nuclear weapon against the USSR in spite of its monopolistic situation, at least until 1951–1953 (Joxe 1990; Price 2007; Tannenwald 1999; 2008).

'Commercial liberalism' is another approach in the analysis of international orders (Rosecrance 1986; Levy 1989, Copeland 1999; Laroche 2004). Here, states do not resort to armed violence when the economic costs of armed aggression are high and when the benefits of such aggression are weak. And yet, the costs of an aggressive action are high between interdependent economies, to the extent that the destruction of the other, means the loss of investors, imports and exports. Conquests no longer pay off in economies where factors of production are increasingly mobile and disconnected from the national territory. This thesis is on the whole verified if the example of the OECD is considered, where a war between its member states is unimaginable. Against the extreme thesis that interdependency would automatically lead to peace, an approach in terms of recognition poses the question of how cross border fluxes affect identities promoted by political actors. Most trade has positive identity effects on the implied actors. Being perceived as a commercial partner is the beginning of recognition. Thus, the *détente* between the Soviet and the Western bloc in the 1970s was preceded by a commercial opening. Nonetheless, for authoritarian regimes (de facto 'closed' regimes) the perspective of a commercial opening is often perceived as a threat, as shown by the North-Korean, Iranian or Taliban cases. The fact remains that the unequal separation of the benefits of the globalised market and of commercial trade is a major cause of identity frustration. The differences in standards of living between nations also affect peoples' self-esteem, particularly during our era of 'rolling news' and the influxes of tourism. 'Islamist' attacks are often on luxury hotels, such as in Egypt and in Indonesia, demonstrating the frustration experienced by the worst off who consider themselves to be scorned.

Finally, the theory of institutional liberalism ('peace by institutions') corroborates the recognition argument to a certain extent (Keohane 1984; Kupchan and Kupchan 1995; Devin 2007). As John Ikenberry has underlined, an order is stronger and sparks off less opposition and counter-coalitions when the hegemonic power limits itself and exercises its domination in a multilateral way (Wolforth 1999; Ikenberry 1981; 2002).

However, from a symbolic perspective, it is not only the satisfaction of the material interests of weaker states by 'benign hegemony' that guarantees international stability. The durability of an order also is maintained if this domination is not perceived as being 'humiliating' by the weaker states. Thus, the Clinton administration, keen on multilateralism, attracted less opposition than the G.W. Bush administration because European political powers had the feeling that they were being treated as key players in world politics.

### **Approaches in the analysis of international orders from the recognition point of view**

The recognition approach is without a doubt the closest of the constructivist analyses that evaluate the stability of the international system in relation to identities and shared norms (Kratochwil 1987; Wendt 1994; Hopf 1999). This intersubjective perspective may explain why states comply, more frequently than is usually assumed, as they are naturally concerned with maintaining a positive self-image within the international community. Thus, the United States refrains from using tactical nuclear weapons despite their strategic advantage in breaking down dictators' bunkers, like in 1991 in Iraq, fearing reprisals from the international community. It is illusory to think that power can be exercised without taking account of shared morale sentiments (Thomas 2001: 22–47). Going further than constructivists, I would like to highlight the 'material' existence of a 'recognition denial' (Honneth 1991) that is capable of leading to war. The stigmatisation of great powers and their exclusion from international institutions constitute, from this perspective, such denials.

#### *Working hypotheses, methods and plan*

This chapter is based on a comparison of four great power systems. The selection of my four cases is directed by the objective to choose cases with a great deal of variation in the dependent variable – armed and militarised conflicts – and little variation in the independent variables.<sup>2</sup> Thus while the four cases vary a great deal in regard to armed conflicts and militarised disputes such as the first period of the Congress of Vienna (1815–1853) and the Versailles system (1919–1939), they vary little in regard to numerous variables such as the powers involved (all of our cases involve great powers), the nature of power distribution (in nearly all systems except one – we examine multipolar systems) or the historical background (all great power conflicts are taken from the nineteenth and twentieth century).

The first method of verification is to see whether there exists a co-variation

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2. For the selection of case studies: George and Bennett (2005); Elman and Fendius (2001).

between systems with few armed conflicts and militarised disputes and the degree of recognition in relations between great powers. For example, is it true that international systems with ‘self-restraining’ powers, shared political identities, non-punitive peace treaties and inclusion of all powers, are more stable than others? Secondly, I will mobilise many historical studies to detect political actors’ subjective motivations. For instance, to what extent does historical research show that decisions to engage in war or militarised disputes – such as Hitler’s invasion of Poland or the Berlin Blockade (1948/49) – were inspired by recognition themes such as revenge or the desire to save face? Finally, I will expose my recognition hypotheses to a congruence test, meaning that I will weigh them against alternative explanations, particularly of realist thought (Van Evera 1997). All of our cases are the ‘least likely’ cases (King, Keohane and Sidney 1994) for the theme of recognition. They are all related to ‘great’ power conflicts. Scholars expect that in such issues physical survival should easily come before vanity. Contrary to such intuitive understanding of armed conflict, evidence in this chapter suggests that the quest for recognition is as much a cause of international conflict as that of security concerns or profits in terms of power and wealth. The cases presented here show that far from being an epiphenomenon of international relations, attacks (objective or perceived) on esteem or against a state’s self image can have very tangible material effects by legitimising and nourishing physical violence, manifested through war.

According to the first hypothesis, an international order in which great powers claim a superior role over the others is propitious to armed conflicts. Such a configuration easily forms an identity dilemma. The recognition of one actor implies the non-recognition of the other. Thus, it was impossible for Poland to recognise alleged Aryan superiority without jeopardizing its own identity. Similarly, it was impossible for the theocratic and proselytizing Iran to comply with an American power which was keen on spreading democratic values. On the other hand, egalitarian identities strengthen mutual respect, as is the case within the European Union.

I will empirically identify hubristic identities or, on the contrary, the more modest, of the great powers by examining the architecture of their new governmental buildings. I have differentiated three forms of architecture: ostentatious architecture (2 points), representative architecture (1 point) and modest architecture (0 points). Two simple criteria make this differentiation possible: the dimensions and costs of newly constructed governmental buildings and their ‘regular’, or, on the contrary, their ‘curved’ form. One can reasonably hypothesise that over-sized and rectilinear architectural dimensions transmit hubristic images of political leaders and a will to control the world, such as Adolf Hitler’s *Reichskanzlei* conceived by A. Speer. Then, I shall examine if ‘hubristic’ architecture is associated with militarised disputes and armed conflicts between great powers, relying on the Correlates of War Project database created by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and Michigan.<sup>3</sup>

My second hypothesis postulates that the heterogeneity of domestic identi-

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3. Correlates of War 2 Project. Small and Singer (1982); Jones, Bremer and Singer (1996).