

Retrieving the Paths of Universalism

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The event illuminates its own part,
It can never be deduced from it
(Hannah Arendt¹)

In 2024, we witnessed the Palestinian tragedy from the sidelines, to end up with a complete confusion of opinion as to the causes of the catastrophe. After several years of relative calm in the international situation, the more modern part of society had come to believe that the rise in the level of political reflection could gradually lead to conflicts being confined to regional levels, under the supervision of international monitoring bodies such as the ICC. Anticipating possible situations of tension, thinking was developing around the difficulties of multiculturalism and the solutions of interculturalism, with a view to organizing a harmonious juxtaposition between different cultures. The suddenness of the explosion on October 7-2023 gave rise to a multitude of idle reflections on the search for causes, all focused on the most immediate events, detached from knowledge of their maturation. Politicians and journalists, for example, explained the prolongation of the war in Gaza by the simple stubbornness of Benjamin Netanyahu and Yahya Sinwar, for reasons of personal prestige, when in fact neither of them could decide on their own to create or not a Palestinian state, since this was the object of the conflict. Others, with a touch of goodwill, thought they could calm things down with images of a little Palestinian girl fraternizing with an Israeli boy, or an old turbaned Arab conversing with an old Jewish man in a hat.

As had happened after the First World War, the universalist dreams that had flourished after 1945 were quickly swept away by a gradual return to crisis. As Habermas² notes, "as soon as society as a whole is no longer represented as a subject of a higher order that undertakes to know itself, to determine itself and to realize itself ... without such a macro-referential, something like a self-reflexive knowledge of the social totality is just as unthinkable as an action of society on itself". Looking back on international developments since 1945, two phenomena stand out in particular: unequal conflicts and colonial legacy.

Unequal conflicts, which pit the state capacities of a great power against a population lacking the appropriate means of defense, are a specific situation of the period, and relatively new at this level of intensity in history. It is linked to the availability, in the dominant countries, of military equipment inherited from the war, especially tanks, which had become the norm in fighting between armies. Their use in socio-political conflict between states was to some extent inaugurated by the Russian occupation of Budapest in 1956, with more than a thousand tanks in front of the civilian population. This situation was repeated in 1948 with

¹ Hannah ARENDT (1953): Understanding and Politics. Boston university.bu.edu/partisanreview Vol.XX-4

² Jürgen HABERMAS (1988): Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Suhrkamp Verlag.

the "Prague coup", when the Russian army deposed the government of Czechoslovakia. In both cases, the presence of tanks in the streets made a deep impression on the population, but there was no reaction from a completely disoriented public. France did not use tanks in the Algerian war, fortunately, but they reappeared in the cities of the Gaza Strip in 2023-2024, along with bombing planes, even more effective in the absence of anti-aircraft defenses on the part of the adversary. All this military hardware has been used with a certain indifference on the part of Western civilization. The enormity of the contrast between the forces involved in these new battles explains why the conditions for dialogue are no longer comparable to those of the immediate post-war period, and why the effectiveness of control bodies is now reduced.

Along with the antagonism between the Western world and Russia, the aftermath of colonialism is one of the most troubling factors in post-1945 international relations. Whereas in the years leading up to the war, the colonial system was part of the political landscape, demands for independence became more widespread, and what was then known as the "Third World" gradually emerged as a major element in world politics, culminating in the BRICS in 2009. Relations between the Western world and Russia, for their part, went through a very tense phase during the "Cold War" period. The situation changed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Some, like Philipp Ther³, wondered whether the West had lost the peace. Far from looking after the defence of the Serbs in Kosovo, NATO was in fact devoted to bringing the Central European countries closest to Russia into the alliance. A lost opportunity, no doubt, but if peace can be lost just as easily as war, the consequences can be just as serious. The situation of conflict between the two blocs has thus been maintained, and even reinforced.

The Palestinian situation has plagued the debate between Europe and the Arab-Muslim world since the early years of the post-war period. As we know, the origin of the conflict was simple and might have seemed peaceful, since it was a question of providing part of the Jewish population, after years of suffering under Hitler's domination, with the possibility of a free and independent country of refuge. The choice was made on the Middle East region where the kingdom of Judah had existed 3,000 years ago, Palestine. It had been part of the Ottoman Empire until the First World War, and had been administered under British mandate since 1920, with a relatively small population (550,000 Muslims, 75,000 Christians, 85,000 Jews). A Muslim High Council had been set up by the British. By 1947, as a result of post-war migration, the population had grown to 1,400,000 Muslims and 700,000 Jews. The UN then decided to propose borders for a Jewish state - a first mistake, and one wonders what could have been the project of the diplomats who had made such conflict-prone proposals. What was to be the "Jewish State" was divided into three pieces, the Negev in the south, a narrow coastal strip from Jaffa to Haifa, and the western part of the Jordan Valley north of Lake Tiberias. The result was the first open Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, which saw Israel progressively occupy the Gaza Strip, as well as Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria - virtually the whole of "Mandate Palestine". The 1948 armistice lines replaced the borders established by the UN the previous year. In 1967, a second Arab-Israeli war (the "Six-Day War") enabled Israel to occupy the whole of former Mandate Palestine. After this new military victory, an apparent peace was established between the State of Israel and neighboring states, leading

³ Philipp THER (2023): How the West lost the Peace. Polity

international opinion to believe that a normal situation had been re-established. However, as no measures were taken to restore civil peace, the country's internal situation worsened dangerously, and foreign public opinion was not aware of the development of Palestine's desire for independence. Israel's political leaders had the same dismissive reaction to international organizations as France had during the Algerian war, when the authorities of the day called UN "le machin" (you know what). The local Palestinian population accepted the presence of the occupier as best they could, with a deafening resentment at the checkpoints that blocked communications, and at the multiple steps required to obtain authorization for the slightest movement, not to mention the constant sensation of being at the mercy of an angry sentry equipped with a machine-gun. The local Israeli population, for their part, could see nothing, as they were forbidden to enter Palestinian spaces, especially when they were enclosed by walls, which is not to say they were happy, as they lived in constant fear of the wolves coming out of the woodwork. Mothers trembled when their children took the bus to school in the morning, because there were so many attacks.

In 1968, the various resistance movements joined forces to form the PLO for the Liberation of Palestine. In 1996, their leader Yasser Arafat was elected President of the Palestinian Authority. His recognition of the State of Israel's right to exist opened the way for the first time to possible negotiations for an independent Palestinian state, with the support of the US government at the time. Arafat's death in unclear circumstances in 2004 put an end to this hope. The Israeli political world was lulled into believing that the death of the leader would make the population forget its thirst for independence. After Arafat's death, the Palestinian Authority lost its influence, in a situation quite analogous to that of the French collaborationist government under German occupation from 1940 to 1944. The PLO lost its authority to a new resistance movement preparing a nationalist insurrection, Hamas. The Israeli government, emboldened by its military successes, hardened its positions and Hamas launched a deadly military operation in October 2023. The Israeli response caused thousands of deaths throughout 2024, plunging the region into a situation of hitherto unknown gravity, to the point where universalism is a word no longer dared to utter.

How did we get here? Global conflicts are simply the transposition of conflicts between human beings to the global level. They do not usually arise from a deliberate will, but rather after a long maturation in which it is not always immediately clear where responsibility lies. The beginning of the twenty-first century gave us the opportunity to observe conflicts with relative lucidity, because they were abundantly reported by the media, because we were associated with them through our personal histories, our families, our friendships, without however, for Western Europeans, being directly involved. What stands out above all is the lack of precaution against the risks that were looming. This is particularly true of the Palestinian question. The settlement of a refugee population could have been very well understood by the local population if relations of cooperation had taken precedence over relations of domination. Since the Western world had taken the initiative for Jewish settlement, it was incumbent upon it to ensure its realization through equivalent financial and technical assistance to both populations, and to help draw lines of influence between them. The UN's 1947 proposal for boundaries was already a real preparation for conflict. The lack of access to the sea for the Palestinian side was another. Gradually, all geographical possibilities for Palestinian development were eliminated. Denied the right to vote in the Hebrew state, the

Palestinian population had to do with a subordinate state with no defined territory, no international recognition, and not even the freedom to issue passports to its members for stays abroad. Step by step, the situation began to resemble that of the colonies of yesteryear, and even more keenly felt by the Muslim population that this colonial condition was outdated in the context of the 21^{ème} century. While Western civilization had a duty, in line with its stated principles, to restore dignity to those who had been deprived of it, it lost interest in the conflict.

In these conflicts, whether in Ukraine or Gaza, the UN has lost the game, and that's the most serious thing for the future. After these failures, what moral force could it have left to intervene in Taiwan, for example? The attempt to create a League of Nations after 1918 failed in the face of the European conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s, and the League of Nations is no more than a historical memory. Will the same be true of the UN and its various humanitarian agencies? Its peacekeeping forces have been fired upon and its services have been banned in Gaza. It is hard to see how its conciliatory role can be maintained, when in two different conflicts two heads of state, in Russia and Israel, are under indictment by the International Tribunal. Some countries are beginning to call for Israel's exclusion from the international organization. Since its creation, the UN has been dominated by the victorious countries of the Second World War, especially the United States. Since then, the world has changed, and South-East Asia, Africa and South America do not carry the weight corresponding to their importance. As a result, the International Tribunal's judgments have always tended to focus on African countries with low GDP, but never on Western bloc countries. Can peace be maintained for long, at least in appearance, without a common structure for global dialogue?

Since 1945, the military power of the United States has given the impression of a kind of world policeman, ensuring the security of the countries of the Western bloc. The United States even faced the "hegemonic dilemma" evoked by Colin Flint⁴ (2004), i.e. the contradiction between infiltrating the sovereignty of other states under the guise of universalism and limiting immigration internally under the pretext of maintaining national barriers. The hegemonic position of the United States is now under threat. In military terms, new computer techniques, boosted by AI, can change the course of events at any moment, and in terms of social and political ideas, the influence of the democratic West has been damaged by the latest conflicts, diminishing the connivance between its members. Universalist thinking is everywhere being stifled by nationalist discourse with no ideals other than its own. Quiet and reasoned observation of the events of 2023-2024 could undoubtedly put humanity back on the road to progress.

⁴ Colin FLINT (2004): *The War on Terrorism and the Hegemonic Dilemma*, in John O'Loughlin et al. *Globalization and its Outcomes*. New York: Guilford Press.