



“Global Civil War” A Primer¹

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Abstract: The motivation for this research note is twofold. First, it seeks to expose the concept of “war” as a problem. What do we mean when we speak of war today? Second, the idea of “global civil war” already suggests that war is not what it used to be and that it has become an important part of our lifestyle. Recently, war metaphors have been used to describe both the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests.

Why “Global Civil War?”

The motivation for this research note is twofold. First, it seeks to expose the concept of “war” as a problem. What do we mean when we speak of war today? How can the concept keep its relevance while we are trying to understand what is happening to our modes of interaction? Second, the idea of “global civil war” already suggests that war is not what it used to be and that it has become an important part of our lifestyle. The relevance of trying to think anew what war means in a globalized context is further highlighted each time the war metaphor is used to characterize events that are not contained locally. Recently, war metaphors have been used to describe both the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests.

Overview of the Structure

This entry starts by offering some historical context for the phenomenon of civil war. It then moves to show how the 20th century has witnessed a qualitative transformation in the way war and the possibilities for mutual annihilation are experienced. The concept of global civil war has emerged within this specific historical context. The entry then moves to offers a quick genealogy of the expression “global civil war” and how it has developed, from the outset of the First World War to the aftermath of 9/11. This finally leads to contemporary comments on the issue of global civil war coming from a variety of sources such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, and Giorgio Agamben.

1. Historical context

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was first presented in 2016 to the “The Working Group on War and Culture,” during the 14th meeting of the *Cultural Studies Association*, Villanova University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A Spanish translation was produced by Gerardo Muñoz for the cultural magazine *Ficción de la razón*: “[La Guerra Civil Global: Una introducción](#)” (Nov. 28, 2022). The paper was slightly updated for this publication. The same version is also available online at [aphelis.net](#).

Civilian conflicts do not represent a new phenomenon. According to the interpretation shared by Plato, human beings who first gathered in cities were actually harming each other: “they did wrong to one another.” That is because at the beginning they were lacking “civic art” or more precisely the arts of politics, which encompass the art of war². The story of those internal conflicts continues all the way to the *stasis*: a word Thucydides used to designate a violent confrontation internal to the civilian members of a given city-state. Thucydides specifically linked *stasis* to the Peloponnesian War in his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*³.

French Hellenist Nicole Loraux has shown in an important study that conflictual modes of interaction were intimately rooted in the way Hellenic antiquity conceived of politics (1997⁴). Loraux does not merely argue that lethal group conflicts are part of a human nature—a theory that is still the object of debates⁵. Instead, she shows that generalized conflicts internal to human groups were born with the idea of politics. That is to say, that *stasis* or “civil war” is not the opposite of politics, but constitutive of it. In other words, antagonistic conflicts are inherent to organized forms of life. Later, in the first century BC, the Romans coined the expression “*bellum civile*” to name this condition⁶. It can be found in the title of an account written by Julius Caesar c. 40 BC: *Commentarii de Bello Civili*.

In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes thought about war as a state of nature. In his view, the natural way of being together implies divisive struggles and could easily fuel a war of “all against all.” The principle of sovereign authority was brought as a way to immunize us against the state of nature. Roberto Esposito has convincingly argued that the immunization against violent conflicts and violent death grounds the modern paradigm of political philosophy⁷. Elsewhere, Esposito has further underlined the importance that a certain tradition of Italian political philosophy—starting with Machiavelli—grants to the “immanentization of antagonism”: the fact that conflicts are constitutive of political order⁸.

This short overview presents how existence and conflict have been thought together. In those views, politics is either constituted by those conflicts or it as a way to avoid them. This is the general background against which the idea of global civil war will form.

2. The 20th century and the possibility of self-annihilation

The 20th century seems to have brought this problem to unprecedented levels of intensity. Alongside the desire for the renewal of adequate forms of political unity emerges a mode of coexistence tragically characterized by massive expressions of

² Protagoras LOEB, 322b (p. 132-133).

³ Jonathan J. Price, *Thucydides and Internal War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁴ Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*. New York: Zone Books, 2006.

⁵ See John Horgan, “[Has a Bogus Theory of War Kept Obama from Being a Peace President?](#)”, *Scientific America*, June 1st, 2016.

⁶ David Armitage, *Civil War: A History in Ideas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

⁸ Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*. Trans. By Zakiya Hanafi. Stanford, Calif.; London: Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 45-58.

violence, conflicts and confrontations. The deadly catastrophes that have shaken the past century still move “us” today. The very movement that brings human beings together carries with it the potential to fuel various forms of political life grounded in mutual destruction. From this perspective, it is clear that the problem of relation through confrontation, far from belonging to prehistoric or antique times, clearly remains a shared legacy: something we inherited as an open wound. At this point, it becomes possible to understand why and how the classical category of war could use a revision.

It is one of the strengths of Michel Foucault’s analysis to have shown us how, in present times, the politics of life are paradoxically always susceptible to transform into works of death. This situation has become possible because politics and war are but two different strategies of coding the power of biopolitics: strategies where one is “always liable to switch into the other”⁹. The most deadly conflicts of the last century have been carried out in the name of safeguarding the integrity of life: the life of a population, a nation, a community: “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessities: massacres have become vital.”¹⁰

In the course of the 20th century, from the outset of the First World War to the ongoing discussions about the so-called anthropocene, the capacity for the human species to completely destroy itself has been and remains a recurrent motif. In his 1919 essay “The Crisis of the Mind,” Paul Valery already observed, “We later civilizations ... we too know that we are mortal.”¹¹ A decade later, Freud concluded his essay about *Civilization and its discontents* by commenting, “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction.”¹² Following the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, similar worries were expressed by various authors, ranging from Albert Camus to Georges Bataille, Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt and others.

3. “Global civil war”: genealogy of the concept

In October 2001, Giorgio Agamben gave two seminars on civil war at Princeton University. He used part of his findings in his essay *State of Exception*, first published in Italian in 2003. The seminars themselves were only published later, in 2015, under the title *Stasis. Civil War as a Political Paradigm*.

In *State of Exception*, Agamben suggests the expression “global civil war” appears in the same year—1963—in Carl Schmitt’s book *Theory of the partisan* and in Hannah Arendt *On Revolution*¹³. As others have already pointed out, Hannah Arendt does not use the expression “global civil war” in her book, but wrote instead of “a kind of civil war

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. by Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1978, p. 137.

¹¹ “La Crise de l’esprit” originally appeared [in English, in two parts](#), in *The Athenaeum* (London), April 11 and May 2, 1919. The French text was published the same year in the August number of [La Nouvelle Revue Française](#).

¹² Trans. By James Strachey. New York. W.W. Norton & Cie. Inc. 1961, p. 92.

¹³ *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2005: 3.

raging all over the earth.”¹⁴ The word Schmitt used which is being translated as “global civil war”—*Weltbürgerkrieg*—appeared in an earlier essay, published in 1943¹⁵. Schmitt might have picked it up from Ernst Jünger’s *Paris Diaries*. Jünger indeed wrote of a *Weltbürgerkrieg* in November 1942 to characterize the ongoing Second World War¹⁶. Jünger wrote other comments relevant to the idea of “global civil war” in his essay *Total Mobilization* first published in 1930.

Others have traced the use of the expression as early as 1914, as it was also used to characterize the First World War¹⁷. There would be an important point to make about the difference between those expressions—especially “civil world war” and “global civil war” or “international civil war”—, both in English and in other languages¹⁸. It will suffice to say that the idea of a “civil war” encompassing the whole world emerges in Western thought at the very beginning of the 20th century¹⁹.

For Schmitt, the expression “global civil war” serves to underline the crisis of the principle of the sovereign state. It marks the collapse of the traditional distribution of powers and the risks associated with the emergence of armed conflicts that could bypass the frame of international laws. In such a context, the traditional distinction proposed by Schmitt between friends and foes, which allowed for a certain regulation of antagonistic relations between sovereign states, no longer stands. Instead of being agents of regulation, sovereign states have become a target²⁰.

Similarly, in her essay *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt argued that the distinction between the realm of war (which was located between sovereign states) and the civilian sphere (internal to each sovereign state) began to blur with the First World War. Among other reasons, she refers to the development of new weapon systems and new war strategies. She may have been thinking about the emergence of chemical warfare and the practice of “indiscriminate” or “area” bombing, which culminated during the Second

¹⁴ *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 1963, p. 17.

¹⁵ “*Die letzte globale Linie*”, first published in *Völker und Mere* and republished in *Staat, Großraum, Nomos: Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916–1969*, ed. G. Maschke, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 441-452.

¹⁶ See [A German Officer in Occupied Paris. The War Journals, 1941-1945](#). Trans. by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 118:

“We hear that yesterday’s attack involved only about fifteen aircraft. I am bothered by the landing of the Americans in North Africa even more than by these things. As I respond to contemporary events, I perceive a level of empathy in myself that marks a man who realizes he is caught up less in a world war than in a global civil war. For that reason, I find myself entangled in very different conflicts from those of the hostile nations. The solution to those conflicts is secondary.”

See Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945*. London: Verso, 2016.

¹⁷ See Armitage, 2015 (previously cited) and Ninon Grangé “[La guerre civile \(mondiale ?\) et le dialogue Schmitt-Benjamin](#)”, *Astérior*, vol. 13, 2015.

¹⁸ A good starting point can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy’s preface to the English edition of [The creation of the world or Globalization](#). Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew, New York: SUNY Press, 2007.

¹⁹ The syntagm “global civil war” as it is being retraced here may belong to Western thought, the idea it encompasses does not. For example, both Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism, each in their own unique ways, offer alternative narratives shaped by the acknowledgment that “Apocalypse already happened” (Mark Singer. “[Loving The Alien. In Advance Of The Landing.](#)” *The Wire*, Issue 96, February 1992). See also Kyle P. Whyte “[Indigenous Science \(Fiction\) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises.](#)” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (March 1, 2018): 224–242.

²⁰ Tarik Kochi. “[The Partisan: Carl Schmitt and Terrorism](#)”, *Law Critique*, November 2006, vol. 17, no. 3, 267-295.

World War. This is what prompted her to write of “total war” and of “a kind of civil war raging all over the earth.”

One can imagine how those conditions extend well into the Cold War. Thus, in the “Annual Message to the Congress” he delivered in January 1962, John F. Kennedy could share this observation: “Since the close of the Second World War, a global civil war has divided and tormented mankind.”²¹

4) Contemporary treatments

In the opening lines of *Stasis*, Agamben claims that “[it] is generally acknowledged that a theory of civil war is completely lacking today.”²² This is not quite the case. A professor of political science at Yale University who has written extensively on the topic of civil war, Stathis Kalyvas suggests instead that “the study of civil war by political scientists has boomed [since the mid-1990s]”²³. This interest has further grown with the advent of the “global war on terror” and with the many problems it raises (ethical, political, judicial). The ongoing war in Syria further fuels the discussion.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and in continuity with his work on the problem of “community,” Jean-Luc Nancy wrote an essay titled *The Confronted Community*. He opens up with some considerations about a war that differs from the classical ideas shared by Carl von Clausewitz two centuries earlier. He wrote: “The present state of the world is not a war of civilizations. It is a civil war: it is the internal war of an enclosed city, of a civility, of an ‘urbanity,’ which are in the process of fanning out to the very limits of the world, and, because of this, spreading right to the extremity of their own concepts.”²⁴ In his view, war has become a co-existential condition: our shared condition.

Writing just a few years later, Agamben proposed a complementary diagnostic in his essay *State of Exception*. Working closely with—and against—Schmitt, he argued that the “global civil war” is the exemplary expression of the state of permanent crisis we find ourselves in²⁵. It is a situation where the exception has become the rule of contemporary politics. Peter Sloterdijk shares similar ideas in his *Spheres* trilogy when he writes about a “war of foam”: “What is currently being confusedly proclaimed in all the media as the globalization of the world is, in morphological terms, the universalized war of foams.”²⁶ In doing so, he underlines the confusion between “globalization” and “unity”: the village may have become “global,” it doesn’t mean that it is united and harmonious. Franco Berardi was basically repeating the very same argument in the

²¹ [Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union](#). January 11, 1962.

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*. Trans. Nicholas Heron. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. 2015.

²³ “Civil Wars”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Ed. by Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009. p. 417

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, [“The Confronted Community”](#) Trans. by Amanda Macdonald. *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, no 1, 2003, p. 23.

²⁵ More recently, Agamben has suggested the global pandemic will bring the actualization of the global civil war. See [“Medicine as Religion.”](#) trans. Adam Kotsko, *An und für sich*, May 2, 2020. Originally published as [“La medicina come religione.”](#) A complete list of Agamben’s interventions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is available [here](#).

²⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume I: Bubbles. Microspherology*. Trans. by Wieland Hoban, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011, p. 71.

essay “The Coming Global Civil War: Is There Any Way Out?” published in 2016²⁷. In it, he rhetorically asked if the war was indeed “global” and answered with the following remarks: “No unified fronts are in sight, but fragmented micro-conflicts and uncanny alliances with no general strategic vision abound. ‘World war’ is not the term for this. I would call it fragmentary global civil war.”

Concluding Remarks

Although further developments are in dire need, a couple of points should be clear by now. I’m offering the following two as a basis for further discussion. First, the war may very well be “global,” it does not mean that it is the same for everyone. It is certainly not experienced in the same way in the ruins of Aleppo, in Gaza, and on the streets of Paris. Thus, the war may be global, but a careful analysis remains necessary to outline the ways in which it is currently unfolding. To speak or to write of a “global civil war” cannot serve as a closing argument: it can only mean a request for further discussion.

Second, the blurring of the distinction between the sphere of civilian activities and that of military activities suggests that a “global civil war” also blurs the category of “armed conflicts.” When the war is “everywhere,” as it has been argued elsewhere²⁸, what constitutes a “weapon” becomes unclear as everything can be “weaponized.” This blurring allows to raise another important question: could disasters be included in the ways in which this “global civil war” is experienced? In 2005, war metaphors were used by officials to describe the effects of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The war metaphor was most recently invoked to characterize the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

However, precisely because it is often used and abused, the war metaphor has also raised and still raise some serious criticism²⁹. Hence, the expression “global civil war” shouldn’t be treated as a conceptual panacea, but as an issue demanding further examination and discussion.

²⁷ Franco Berardi, [“The Coming Global Civil War: Is There Any Way Out?”](#) *E-flux*, no. 69, January 2016

²⁸ Derek Gregory, [“The Everywhere War.”](#) *The Geographical Journal* 177.3 (2011): 238–250.

²⁹ To provide only one recent example, see Constanza Musu, [“War metaphors used for COVID-19 are compelling but also dangerous.”](#) *The Conversation*, April 2020. This can be compared to the opposite approach: [“Think of your body fighting an infection as a war.”](#) by Alex Vezina, *Toronto Sun*, Dec. 14, 2022.