

Can this War Be Thought of Politically?

**Claudia Pozzana &
Alessandro Russo**

1Abstract: The world horizon today is that of war without limits, and no conclusion of the ongoing conflicts and the incumbent others is foreseen. Since globalized war is the dark twin of globalized capitalism, the only way out of this war is the exit from capitalism. The problem is that there is no organized idea capable of credibly delineating new ways to invent a world beyond the capital.

Our tasks are dismissing our incapacity, that is, our imaginary limits, and facing the impossible, that is, the real of the situation.

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1. The contemporary dilemma

In front of this war, the classic combination of "the current situation and our tasks" constitutes the contemporary political dilemma. We schematically outline some key points, three for each of the two sides, situation, and tasks.

- The current war is the beginning of a global war, in which the main contradiction is the clash between capitalist powers vying for hegemony.

- The world horizon today is that of war without limits, and no conclusion of the ongoing conflicts and the incumbent others is foreseen.

- The explicit threat of nuclear weapons, whatever the balance of power in different geopolitical situations, shows that the actors of this war do not intend to retreat even in the face of unprecedented risks of human destruction.

- Since globalized war is the dark twin of globalized capitalism, the only way out of this war is the exit from capitalism.

- The problem is that there is no organized idea capable of credibly delineating new ways to invent a world beyond the capital, with the aggravating circumstance that a proper assessment is still to be done on the value of the previous experiments and their failures.

- The two terms of this weakness feed on each other. Without the aspiration to invent new roads, it is impossible to make a sufficiently in-depth assessment of the previous ones. But without such an assessment, there is no way to avoid repeating mistakes that have led to failure. Even worse, new possible experiments are preemptively overwhelmed by the total discredit of which the revanchism of the capitalist restoration has covered the past ones.

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1This is one of the two texts on the present war that we wrote in the summer of 2022. The other, titled "Facing the WW4," will be released in the next *Continental Thought and Theory. A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*, issue dedicated to "War: Cold, Hot ... and Tepid?"

2. Actuality of a question from Badiou

The question in the Call for Papers of this issue of *Crisis and Critique*, "Is politics possible today?" echoes the one that Alain Badiou has been asking since the 1980s, "Peut-on penser la politique?", and continues to illuminate our intellectual horizon.²The relevance of that question must be commensurate with the other that the present time imposes on us: can this war be thought of politically? However, Badiou's themes are also decisive for the present. Two in particular: politics as a singular thought and the assessment of state communism in the twentieth century.

As for the intellectual singularity of politics, it is necessary to untangle its two current meanings: politics as the enjoyment of state power and politics as mass self-liberation. Politics as a thirst for domination is an automatism that does not need any thought. It is only, from time immemorial, the compulsion to repeat struggles between oligarchic factions to conquer and divide state power. On the other hand, politics as self-liberation is what Mao formulated during the Cultural Revolution in the thesis that "the masses can free themselves and no one can act in their place." This politics can only be a series of inventions of new ways of thinking. What is at stake is the search for new collective existence, capable of keeping at a distance the craving to manage the lives of others.

Roads like these have already been tried, but they have failed. First with the defeat of the Cultural Revolution, and finally with the collapse of the USSR. A rethinking of those experiences is indispensable, capable of discerning within them the political impulses of self-liberation from their suffocation in policies of state domination. The fact that the latter were ultimately indistinguishable from any other form of power, namely from capitalism, was the core of what Badiou called the "obscure disaster" of state communism of the twentieth century.³

3. How was the war conceived in the twentieth century?

The assessment of those experiments has particular relevance for thinking about this war. The communisms of the twentieth century were intertwined with great wars, to which they set limits of principle, nourishing thoughts and actions to stop them.

The global wars of the twentieth century were conceived politically, not only in terms of military power relations but in a horizon in which organized ideas aimed to get out of capitalism. Lenin managed to think of the imperialist war from the point of view of the revolution. October was a consequence of the war, but at the same time, it was able to interrupt its destructive logic.

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² Badiou 1985.

³ Badiou 1992.

The other great wars of the twentieth century were also politically conceived by collective mobilizations, in which the possibility of a road beyond capitalism was a decisive reference. It was the case also in the partisan warfare in Europe during the Second World War and in the protracted people's war in China from the 1920s to the 1940s. Ultimately, even the Cold War did not become "Hot" because the clash was first political and civil (was capitalism or socialism more just?), even before than military.

Extra-capitalist political experiments were the main organizational factors that limited those wars and allowed them to end. More precisely, it was primarily the political thrusts for self-liberation that constituted a limit to the war. Only secondarily (and ambiguously), the limit came from the state domination of the various communist parties.

One should not forget that in the 1960s, there were sizeable anti-militarist mass movements. The US lost the Vietnam War not only on the military ground, defeated by a protracted people's war, but above all at home, with student and African-American political movements dismantling the pretensions of imperial militarism. Similar mass movements in Europe developed independently and were often highly critical of existing communist parties, which for their part, regarded them as adventurists and provocateurs. On the other hand, those movements harshly criticized both Soviet social imperialism and American imperialism.

That era ended irreversibly for decades. However, the political attitudes to war in the twentieth century show that it has been possible to tackle even world wars by imposing a limit on them. Today the situation is entirely different: the war is massively expanding because there is no politics capable of fixing its limitations.

4. The dictatorship of opinion

Without such a thought, the dictatorship of opinion is inevitably established over this war. The sinister novelty of our time is that state domination, in its various forms, subsumes war as the world's government, and around it shapes opinion.

For months we have been bombarded with propaganda that proclaims the absolute need for the masses to resign themselves to destruction and for the states to indefinitely increase the destructive power of the military apparatus: unlimited rearmament. An attenuated variant says: rearm, yes, but only for defensive purposes. Also at the beginning of the First World War, the Social Democratic parties voted for "war credits," begging (in vain) that they were used only for defense.

At the edge of the arch-militarist and mid-militarist propaganda inevitably appears the propaganda of finitude. We are told the war would be a lesson against humanity's hubris, which vainly pursues a desire for

infinity. A great artist calls his exhibition "Memento mori," a huge black bone chandelier in Murano glass. A great director presents his theater program as aimed at a didactic of being-for-death.

On the critical opinion front, the prevailing positions are quietly pacifist, those that all wars have always easily disregarded. An indignant call for desertion is a more radical opinion, isolated but determined. This appeal has its revolutionary pedigree. During the First World War, the insubordination and desertion of Russian soldiers were factors that led to the collapse of Tsarism. However, the Bolsheviks' call for desertion was highly politicized, to desert the war to get out of capitalism. The desertion of young Americans during the Vietnam War was also politicized. It was an integral part of mass movements searching for new forms of collective existence, which broke with the arrogance of militarism, racism, and sexism of the "American way of life."

Today, with the uncontested affirmation of capitalism, what is the political value of desertion? How is it different from what pushed soldiers to save their skin in all wars, and for all good reasons?

The worst is that today this war enlists, willy-nilly, all of humanity. NATO sanctions on Russia are a war response to the invasion of Ukraine but are funded directly by mass impoverishment in Europe. The same goes for rearming. Putin calls hundreds of thousands of young people to arms; in Italy, the restoration of the military conscription has been announced. The "compulsory conscription," direct or indirect, of Europe and the world will not stop there. Only a new political vision can make us "desert" from this war without limits.

5. Two temporalities

Is a way out of this war impossible? Better to say that our tasks are dismissing our incapacity, that is, our imaginary limits, and facing the impossible, that is, the real of the situation, without forgetting that the real can be rather unpleasant.

We must organize ourselves to stop this war and get out of capitalism. But what is to be done? We have some ideas about past mistakes that we wouldn't want to repeat, but we don't have enough about the new inventions we need.

The parties, the previous paradigm of political organization, have all been reabsorbed into the logic of state domination. Regardless of their differences, they are all in service of the war today. A politics that wants to distinguish itself from state domination, which today is capitalism everywhere, and stop the war must invent new forms of organization.

However, what can constitute a breadth of political perspectives comparable to those of the parties, including their universalistic aims? That such intentions have never managed to go beyond the conquest and maintenance of state power does not exempt a politics of self-liberation

from pursuing its universality. The issue at stake is thinking about the universality of politics at a distance from parties and states.

Marx said that modern revolutions come to "withdraw in fear at the immensity and infinity of their purposes." How to do it now that there are no revolutions on the horizon, but the tasks are even more infinite? Inevitably, two temporalities are intertwined: long and short.

Leaving the "capitalist Neolithic" (another definition of Badiou that we share) is an epochal transition that will involve several generations. Capitalism has a centuries-old history, grafted onto the millennial history of the family, private property, and the state. Marx and Engels looked at the overcoming of capitalism as a prolonged political itinerary aimed at getting out of "prehistory."

Long physiological times, therefore. To which are added two major contemporary obstacles. One is that capitalism has gained global dominance over the ruins of previous experiments to overcome it. One of its powerful ideological advantages is discrediting the defeated enemy who dared to challenge him. The core of the dominant ideology has been proclaiming for decades that capitalism is irreplaceable, as those failures would demonstrate. This ideology is not only self-congratulatory but aims above all to prevent the possibility of even imagining something else. "There is no alternative" was the motto of the restoration.

The second obstacle, even more pressing, is this war. Its only logic is the indefinite affirmation of global capitalism. In this sense, it has a more directly preemptive function than the dominant ideology of the past decades, aiming to eradicate any deviation in advance. For this reason, all states, however much they are in conflict, are perfectly allied in establishing the war as the world's government.

The eagerness of their commitment to destroy the world comes from the terror that the famous "specter" returns to roam somewhere. So, on with a preemptive war, which will annihilate even the imagination of that "specter," wherever it may lurk. Everything else is secondary. The proclamations on the principles of democracy against autocracy, of the values of the liberal West against the despotic East, or vice versa of the wise and virtuous East against the libertine and decadent West, are the modest fig leaf on the phallic semblance of the all-out war against ghosts.

On the other hand, attention needs to be sharpened on the specific temporality of this globalized war. Although interminable, it will alternate periods of stagnation and sudden catastrophic accelerations, possible armistices, and even temporary peace, which new and more bitter conflicts will follow. These tortuous developments can only be faced by a thought capable of looking at the epochal dimension of the change necessary to stop the war. Otherwise, there will be only deadly complicity or resignation.

It is also necessary to look with the utmost attention at the probable riots this war will provoke in the most intricate and unpredictable forms and ways. Although the now daily threats of nuclear war are made to sow

fear and reduce people to the most inert passivity, the immeasurable increase in the rate of oppression (ideological, economic, military), as always affecting the poorest, will inevitably meet resistance.

It will be decisive to discern in such mass movements affirmation and negation. The affirmative resolutions of other possibilities of existence, therefore open to epochal change, should be separated from the contrastive attitude, based on mere negation, therefore destined to be re-incorporated into existing oppression, even in a worse version. We should draw a lesson from the fate of the mass movements in the past decades. All tuned to a "no" to the existent, they have been silenced by more iron state domination.

6. Impossible tasks

While new skills are needed to organize ourselves politically, we have very few points of reference for doing so. Keeping ourselves at an abstract level (leaving aside the ongoing war for now), the organizational principle of self-liberation politics has at least two requirements: a multiplicity of collectives and the construction of a common intellectual space that nourishes, and is nourished by, their existence.

In all organized places of social life, political collectives can be able to examine and propose the possibilities of social relations independent of capitalist rule, both locally and globally. Let's take an example that we know best. In a school situation, how is it possible to practice an education that is open to thought and not imprisoned in the "exchange at equal value" between "skills" and "grades"? The so-called evaluation is the application of the "law of value." Still, to escape from it, one must broaden the intellectual perspective and look beyond the boundaries of the situation itself, that is, grasping the entirety of capitalist domination in the specificity of a school.

This problem arises everywhere interventions, detailed proposals, and overall projects are to be created. Other examples: how can a non-capitalist organization of public health work? How can there be an artistic, musical, theatrical collective, etc., free from market tyranny? To quote the most tangled knot, how can command and execution be thought beyond the fetishism of technology in all capital-labor relationships? Indeed, it is a close cousin of commodity fetishism, both pillars of the capitalist symbolic order.

In every place of social life, the problem is how to identify the rule that operates there specifically and, at the same time, face its global character. We will need to build a new vast space of intelligence in politics. All the more so in the current situation, in which the war exasperates the capitalist rule.

The organization will therefore require a third fundamental condition: the collective critical acquisition of old and new knowledge

necessary to focus on the situation of globalized war. It will be vital to reinvent forms, methods, and places for elaborating and transmitting this knowledge, open to anyone, even outside the existing school systems.⁴

It will not be governments, nor their diplomatic and military apparatuses, that will end this war. Sun Zi said war is the "great affair of the state, the terrain of life and death." Today it must become an "affair of the state" that everyone can actively deal with to limit and conclude. It takes a vast and profound mass intelligence to face this war.

It should be clear that keeping a distance from the state does not exclude the state from politics. For a politics of self-liberation, the state cannot be an object of conquest (historically, the opposite has happened, the politics conquered by the state), nor a measure of action. On the other hand, a politics capable of influencing state orientations and decisions without participating in power even in its electoral rituals opens up a space of unprecedented inventions.

It is possible to organize collectives capable of pronouncing the right and the wrong of state decisions and demanding rectifications.⁵ For example, to require drastic limitation of the military and stop rearmament; to reactivate labor protection policies dismantled by decades-long legislation that imposed precariousness as a norm; to impose restrictions on the autonomy of finance, which was "deregulated" by the neoliberal restoration in the name of "less state, more market." Yet, these assessments of the actions of governments must be substantiated by arguments based on inquiries and research. Above all, they must result from collective theoretical work and not simply the comparison between opinions, which can only confirm their average circulation (today, "media communication").

We need movements of mass theoretical study; whose tasks are to demonstrate that capitalism is by no means the eternal rule of the world but has its peculiar historicity. It can and must be brought to an end to stop its intrinsically destructive nature: unlimited profit is the chief sponsor of unlimited war.

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4 A tentative list of issues that deserve to be the subject of general study:
the analysis of the causes and developments of today's war
the classical and contemporary military thought
the historical experience of state communism and its relationship with war
post-socialist capitalism
the transformations of labor and finance legislation since the 1980s
birth and decline of the twentieth-century parties
the long sixties and their conclusion at the end of the seventies
the hypertrophy of the military in recent decades

5 Think of the equality movements of African Americans in the 1960s.

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