

**WAR AS THE MIRRORED IMAGE OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY.
The English School and the Growing Crisis of War Convention**

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Not for Quotation

The conventional wisdom usually overlooks the relationship between the form which war has been taking in the last decades and the changing form of international society as a whole. Instead, war is described as an invisible and finite exception to the rule of contemporary international society which is simultaneously represented as if it should just move in the opposite direction – towards the expansion of democracy, the assertion of human rights and, in the background, the transition from the *old* international society of states to a *new*, cosmopolitan global society. Accustomed throughout the bipolar era to a clear division of labour between theorists of Cold War and theorists of interdependence, most political scientists and international relations scholars continue to consider war as an accident. At the same time, the fact that this kind of accident is less and less similar to the accidents of the past, is relegated to scholars of war and strategy.

In this paper, I aim at restoring the relationship between the (changing) form of war and the (changing) form of international cohabitation, by focusing on the reflection of the *British Committee on the Theory of International Politics* and, in particular, on Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. The paper is divided into four parts. The first one argues why war offers an ideal perspective from which to look at the changes taking place in the international system, and at the differences among the major traditions of International Relations Theory. The second one regards war as a paramount feature of the tension between international system and international society – i.e. between the network of political, economic and strategic interdependences which make up the former and “the development among states of a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life” (Bull 1977: 67), through which the system transforms itself into an international society. The third one addresses the political, juridical and cultural fundaments which make any bracketing of war possible and, in particular, has allowed for the modern (Westphalian) solution to the problem of international violence: inter-state war. The last one focuses on the growing collapse of this solution and the contemporary crisis of modern international society.

The final outcome is paradoxical. While the great design of the overcoming of war – the «invention of peace», as Michael Howard (2001) recently called it – had repeatedly failed all along the twentieth century, at the beginning of the next century the prophecy is somewhat fulfilled, but not in the same sense as it was expected. War has become unmentionable – but violence has not disappeared from the international life. The major international actors have not renounced to resort to force – but a strong incentive has grown to hide it under the appearance of peace, so that not mentioning war has become the condition for fighting it. The perception of interstate war as an acceptable means of preserving the balance of power or effecting just changes has paved the way for a widespread perception of war as a threat to international society – but the erosion of the traditional concept of interstate war has produced more ubiquitous violence, as well as the outflow of actual hostilities have overcome any notional and legal distinction between peace and war.

1. War as a Key to Understanding International Relations

Just like in the contemporary reflections of such other European scholars as Raymond Aron and Carl Schmitt, in all of the major proponents of the English School war appears to be much more than the continuation of policy by other means. War is the reflection of policy, its mirrored image. Looking at war we can say whether the use of violence is consistent with social order or reveals its collapse, what the principle of social life is and who its actors are, what relationship they have with space and what role, if any, law plays.

This recognition makes war a fundamental key to understanding international relations. First and foremost, the possibility as well as the legitimacy of war does have a symbiotic relationship with the very nature of modern international politics- i.e. international anarchy, the pluralism of states, the resulting principle of self defence. As Martin Wight (1979: 102) put it, “this is the situation of ‘Hobbesian fear’ which Herbert Butterfield has called ‘the absolute predicament and the irreducible dilemma’ of international politics. War are fought for many different causes... But all particular causes of war operate within the context of international anarchy and the Hobbesian fear”. It is no accident that, in turn, also the principal efforts to radically change international politics have revolved around war – from the actual reform put forward by the United Nations, which has already dramatically limited the legitimate use of force in international law, to the revolutionary change demanded by advocates of global society and world government: a change intended to eradicate war by transforming international politics into domestic politics on a global scale.

This symbiotic (albeit controversial) relationship leads us to a second point. While reflecting both the nature and the possible transformation of international cohabitation, war is also the crucial case for assessing the fundamental differences among the three major traditions of thought about International Relations (Wight 1994; Bull 1966: 35-50): the Hobbesians (or Machiavellians, as Martin Wight calls them), the Kantians and the Grotians – or, as they are otherwise called, the Realists, the Revolutionists or Universalists, and the Rationalists or Internationalists. The Hobbesian tradition conceives war as the paramount expression of the continuity of international politics. “Because of their interior acceptance of international anarchy” (Wight 1994: 208), not only do Realists consider war as being natural and inevitable, but also they “have no use

for a doctrine of just war” (Ibidem: 220). In this crude perspective, war has no limits but the ones dictated by one’s power, one’s goals and, above all, the interaction among combatants. In fact, as Clausewitz put it, war

“is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass (total non-resistance would be no war at all) but always the collision of two living forces. The ultimate aim of waging war, as formulated here, must be taken as applying to both sides. Once again, there is interaction. So long as I have not overthrown my opponent I am bound to fear he may overthrow me. Thus I am not in control: he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him” (Clausewitz 1984: 77).

The Kantian tradition, at the other extreme, agrees with Realists in emphasizing the nexus between war and anarchy: but, unlike the latter, it strongly believes that both of them can be overcome. The resulting conception of war is somehow paradoxical. On the one hand, instead of holding war to be self-justifying, Revolutionists or Universalists explicitly aim at eradicating it, through the overcoming of its structural cause, international anarchy, and the edification of a world government as a substitute for the state system. On the other hand, they make an exception for those wars which are directed “not simply to restore peace, but to *end wars*” (as summed up by the Allied slogan of the first World War and, even more, by the Communist and Soviet propaganda). In so doing, they end up turning such wars into “a vehicle of historical apocalypse” (Wight 1994: 214). “Legitimate and *holy*, just and *sacred*; here, beneath the language of the just war doctrine, we see the language of the doctrine of the holy war” (Ibidem: 222-223). Maybe affected by his religious views, as well as by his repulsion towards the progressivist doctrines of International Relations (Bull 1977a; Bull 1994), Martin Wight goes so far as to establish an explicit nexus between nihilism, revolution and Western modernity: “Islam may have invented the holy war, but it did not exterminate. Moreover, this kind of extermination is something specifically Western, as Revolutionism is specifically Western” (Wight 1994: 229).

The Grotian tradition¹ stands between the former ones². Unlike the Kantian or universalist perspective, it “accepts the Hobbesian premises that sovereigns or states are the principal reality in international politics” (Bull 1977: 26), and that anarchy makes war an inevitable evil. Indeed, the possibility of war seems to be held as the necessary price to be paid for preserving the political *value* of anarchy – a value which results from “a preference for liberty in international relations over order or security: the liberty of states and nations from domination by a central power, and of individuals from the reach of a tyrannical government whose ubiquitous authority must deny them the right of foreign asylum” (Bull 1966: 50). But unlike the Hobbesian tradition, the Grotians contend that states are not bound to be “engaged in simple struggle, like gladiators in an

¹ Actually, in *Diplomatic Investigations* Bull (1966: 51-73) maintains that Grotius still makes such important concessions to the domestic analogy, and to the idea of the universal community of mankind, as to impose upon the international society of states a strain which it cannot bear. Therefore, Bull does consider Grotius as to be extraneous to the pluralist conception of international society, even though in a different manner than the neo-Grotians of the 20th century: “Grotius stands at the birth of international society and is rightly regarded as one of its midwives. For him the terminology of a universal state is what is still normal, and the language of international relations can be spoken only with an effort. The neo-Grotians, however, have three more centuries of the theory and practice of international society behind them; their novelty lies not in moving away from the domestic model in international relations, but in moving back towards it” (Bull 1966: 66).

² Martin Wight (1966: 89-131) goes so far as to explicitly define the Grotian tradition as a *via media*, as the *juste milieu* that may be detected from time to time in Western statesmen, political philosophers and jurists such as Suarez, Grotius, Locke, Halifax, Montesquieu, Burke, Gentz, Coleridge, Tocqueville and so on.

arena” (Bull 1977: 26). On the contrary, they draw attention to the normative and legal aspects of war as well as the steady attempts to impose restraints on its methods, against the backdrop of the long (albeit fragile) tradition of the “limited wars” – from the wars between the Greek *poleis* before the Peloponnesian war, to the wars which took place in the feudal society and in the chivalrous world, among the mercenary soldiers of the 16th century, among the pre-Napoleonic armies, in the “bourgeois century” between the Congress of Vienna and the Geneva and Hague Conferences, up to the attempts to impose restrictions on the possession and use of nuclear arms during the Cold War.

This constitutive ambiguity makes war an ideal perspective from which to look at the relationship between continuity and discontinuity in international relations, all the more so when a radical change in the form of war has just occurred or is still occurring - the “existential truth” which embraces the intellectual reflections of Grotius himself in the aftermath of the civil wars of religion, Carl Clausewitz in the transition from the eighteenth century’s to the Napoleonic wars, as well as the witnesses to the total wars of the twentieth century. This is also our third point. While remaining the most impressive element of continuity in the history of international politics, war has continuously been changing with respect to such crucial dimensions as political intensity, the degree of destructiveness, the compliance itself with the existing norms and principles of “chivalry”, “decency”, “fairness” or law, whatever the fundament may be for the bracketing of violence.

Of course, this historical pattern depends to a great extent on pure technological, social or political factors: economic growth, population shift, significant increases in the efficiency of transportation and communication, military innovations, transformations in the domestic character of the major actors, radical changes in the structure of the international system. The limitations resulting from each of these factors do not require any legal or cultural conventions among combatants; indeed, they may also arise among actors who do not share anything and perceive one another as perfectly strangers.

But the same thing is not true for another kind of war limitation, stemming from positive conventions among combatants. In this second case, the quality of war suggests something significant about the social and juridical quality of international life. This is what Raymond Aron emphasized by drawing attention to the continuous oscillating of warfare between game and total violence, namely, between the transformation into an institution and elementary fury. And this is also what Carl Schmitt recognized as the never ending tension between the “razionalization and humanization” of war put forward by the European International Law, and the reappearance of other “worse types of war, such as reversions to civil war and other types of war of annihilation” (Schmitt 2003: 246).

The essence of European international law was to limit war. The essence of such wars was an organized measuring of strength, which took place in front of witnesses in a delimited space. Such wars are the opposite of disorder. In them is the highest form of order of which human intelligence is capable. They are the only defense against a spiral of retaliation, revenge and nihilistic hatred, whose senseless goal is reciprocal annihilation (Schmitt 2003: 228).

2. War and International Society

The changing weight of war convention could not escape the English School’s notice. On the one side, since “the scholars of Committee, in line with best English

practice, repeatedly emphasise the high value of ‘experience’ – present or historical” (Vigazzi 2005: 42): and the very crisis of war convention is essential part of their “experience”, “extended far over time and space” all along the twentieth century (Ibidem: 126), from the “Total Wars” of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 to the asymmetrical wars of decolonization, and nourished by the growing tendency for war to “become the instrument of doctrinal conviction” (Wight 1979: 139-140). Revolutionary and civil war are per se “tinged with doctrinal ferocity, and have unlimited aims. They tend to be not war for defined objectives, but crusaders or wars for righteousness. They aim, not at a negotiated settlement, but at a ‘Carthaginian peace’ or ‘unconditional surrender’...” (Wight 1979: 91-92).

On the other side, the English School disposes of a conceptual tool suitable for coping with this topic: the notion of international society and the distinction between international society and international system. Actually, this distinction should not be taken too far, nor should it be understood too rigidly or dogmatically, all the more so because relevant differences re-emerge in the way the members of the Committee interprets it, and even in the way each member conceives international society in the various stages of his intellectual life – also according with the different “challenges which international life poses and re-proposes” (Vigazzi 2005: xvii). Moreover, even though various indications and definitions are offered in order to distinguish international society from international system, a number of features remain fluid and even common between the two (Ibidem: 293-294), while, as Herbert Butterfield contends, it is not fully resolved the central issue of “how far the formal distinction reflects a significant reality” (Watson quoted ibidem: 294). But the distinction persists and helps to put the significance of anarchy into perspective, not only by recognizing that order can exist in anarchy, as realists and neorealists also do, but, beyond them, by understanding that the international order is something more than the (*ever changing*) result of power relations; it also depends, at a more profound level, on a (*more persistent*) set of political, juridical and cultural restrictions which, over the last three centuries, have allowed international competition to develop according to certain rules and, above all, in keeping within certain limits.

War cannot escape the distinction between international system and international society. From the point of view of the former, war appears to be as a basic result of the lack of government (a *structural* consequence of a *structural* feature) (Waltz 1979), as well as a persistent determinant of the shape the system assumes at any time, according with the well-known relationship between hegemonic war and international change (Gilpin 1981). But what about the role of war in international society? Actually, the first temptation would be to conceive war as the opposite of society (and law) – and it is not accident that this is just the way in which their relationship has been commonly viewed in the last decades. But it is not the way in which the British Committee looks at it. Even though the possibility is not excluded that some kinds of war bring with them the breakdown of international society, war and order are generally held as consistent with one another - so far as to define war as a fundamental institution of international society.

Nevertheless, the meaning of this definition raises some doubts. In *Power Politics*, for instance, Martin Wight explicitly mentions war among the institutions of international society – namely, as “the institution for the final decision of differences” (Wight 1979: 112). Yet it remains somehow unclear whether this institutionalization of war depends (only) on the fact that, in recurrent circumstances, to fight and win war turns out to be the only means to decide authoritatively if and when the international

law has been violated (Wight 1979: 111) – that is: the only means to defend and promote law. Or, instead, war may be held as an institution since it is affected and restrained by law – all the more so because the existence of international law is conceived as “the most essential evidence for the existence of an international society” (Wight 1979: 107) and, in turn, the law of war is seen as “the moral and aspiring aspect of international law” (Wight 1977: 109). In both cases, the conception of war as an institution seems to require a strict relationship with law; but, in the former, war is instrumental to international law, while, in the latter, it is law that is instrumental to the bracketing of war.

Such a tension is even more manifest in Hedley Bull’s work. Deciding whether or not to consider war as an institution of the international society is a problem which has always engaged him profoundly (Vigezzi 2005: 75). Yet it is only in *The Anarchical Society* that Bull recognizes war as one of the constitutive institutions of international society (together with balance of power, international law, diplomacy and the great powers)³. The bond between war and international society appears since the beginning of the book, when “to ensure that life will be in some measure secure against violence resulting in death or bodily harm” is considered as the first of the three elementary and primary goals of all societies (Bull 1977: 4-5) and, therefore, the bracketing of violence is held to be an evidence of the existence of an international society: “If states today form an international society ..., this is because, recognizing certain common interests and perhaps some common values, they regard themselves as bound by certain rules in their dealing with one another, such as that ...they should be subject to certain limitations in exercising force against one another” (Ibidem: 13). This appears to be also the concrete and feasible meaning that the goal of peace acquires in international society: not the *total* absence of war among states in the sense of a “universal and permanent peace” but, instead, “the absence of war... *as the normal condition* of their relationships” (Ibidem: 18), unlike the Hobbesian state of nature and its reception in the most orthodox political realism.

But in what sense is war to be conceived as an institution of international society? Bull does not hide the ambiguities; on the contrary, he explicitly recognizes that, “from the point of view of international society, ...war has a dual aspect” (Ibidem: 187). On the one hand, war seems to be held as an institution just as it does perform a set of functions which, otherwise, might not be fulfilled in international society. From this perspective, war is viewed as a part of the functioning of international society (Bull 1966: 43) or, indeed, as a means which international society itself exploits so as to achieve its own purposes: specifically, a means of enforcing international law, preserving the balance of power, and (as Bull himself concedes, “more doubtfully”) bringing about changes “generally regarded as just” (Bull 1977: 188-189). But one might ask whether the fact that war secures the self-defence of one’s rights (beginning with the right of territorial sovereignty), the balance of power and international change does actually require the existence of an international society or, instead, it is already rooted in the absence of a central authority which characterizes the international system. And, above all, some further questions arise with regard to the nature of war itself: are any kind of wars suitable for achieving those societal purposes? Or war itself, in turn, has to comply with specific principles, norms and rules?

³ For instance, war is not mentioned among the distinctive institutions of international society in *Diplomatic Investigations* (Bull 1966, 48).

This leads to the other side of the relationship between war and international society. Not any war, but only *limited* war, can actually constitute an institution of international society - in the sense that only a limited war can be a consistent part of its functioning. As Bull puts it, since war is also “a manifestation of disorder in international society, bringing with it the threat of breakdown of international society itself into a state of pure enmity or war of all against all”, then “the society of states ... is concerned to limit and contain war, to keep it within the bounds of rules laid down by international society itself” (Ibidem: 187-188). Compared with the first meaning, the relationship between war and international society is fully reversed: it is not (any) war that constitutes a means of international society, but, instead, it is (limited) war that results from its very existence. Also the difference between international system and international society seems to become clearer. In fact, when combatants are not bound by common rules and common values, war cannot have restrictions other than the ones dictated by one’s political goals, the enemy’s will as well as the “magic circle” of technologies (Clausewitz 1984). On the contrary, as the system develops into an international society, war itself meets with other restrictions, which dramatically distinguish international anarchy from the Hobbesian state of nature. There is an indissoluble bond between the form of war and the form of international cohabitation. On the one hand, war cannot have a legal or societal form unless the international cohabitation has one too. On the other hand, any crisis in the form of war should be perceived as a signal of the possible or actual crisis of the international society.

But a last question remains to be answered. What does it mean for war having a form? Or, as Ian Clark (1982: 10) put it: “what do we limit when war is limited?” In answering this question, Bull draws on an uninterrupted tradition of political and juridical reflection:

The goal of limitation of violence is represented in international society in a number of ways. States co-operate in international society so as to maintain their monopoly of violence, and deny the right to employ it to other groups. States also accept limitations on their own right to use violence; at a minimum they accept they shall not kill one another’s envoys or messengers, since this would make communication impossible. Beyond this, they accept that war should be waged only for a ‘just’ cause, or a cause the justice of which can be argued in terms of common rules. They have also constantly proclaimed adherence to rules requiring that wars be fought within certain limits, the *temperamenta belli* (Bull 1977: 19).

This brief quotation summarizes the basic content of the limitations of violence in interstate wars. According to what is held to be the most impressive intellectual tradition of speculation about limits to war, war convention is usually made up of two major components, namely the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*. Put crudely, the first specifies who has the right to wage wars and at which conditions, whereas the second specifies the means which can be employed. Nevertheless, both the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello* do presuppose an even more fundamental convention: a clear and unambiguous notion of *bellum* itself. In order to have *limited war*, we ought to have *war*: namely, not actual hostilities, but a notional state of affairs stemming from cultural, religious or legal processes and defining a special and solemn state of hostility, different from both the (as much notional) state of peace and the concept of “criminal” violence. Here does also the classical distinction arise between “war as an action” and “war as a status” (Schmitt 1939) or, as Bull (1977: 185) puts it, “war in the material sense” and “war in the legal sense”. The first requires actual fights and military operations to take place. The second can exist even when actual and direct fights are

over: *Bellum manet, pugna cessat*. The first is often hard to distinguish from peace, since between the two states of affairs there are gradations, overlaps, if not disguises. The second, instead, is rooted in the need to make the distinction between war and peace absolute (albeit deprived by any references to such eminent but volatile requisites as justice): thus Grotius's doctrine *inter bellum ac pacem nihil est medium*, as well as the diplomatic praxis of the declaration of war.

It is this notional concept of war that makes war conceivable as an institution of the international society of states. Once compared not to domestic pacification, but, instead, to the complete (and always incumbent) indefiniteness which violence possesses once freed by any social or legal framework - as would be the case in unlimited anarchy, and as it actually is in the recurrent case of civil wars - interstate war turns out to be the paramount expression of how anarchy can be put into form within the context of international society: a circumscribed phenomenon, clearly delimited in space and time, and open, not to whomever has the power to fight, but only to those who assume the juridical form of the state and respect the norms and procedures of the society of states. As Hedley Bull puts it,

the development of the modern concept of war as organized violence among sovereign states was the outcome of a process of limitation or confinement of violence. We are accustomed, in the modern world, to contrast war between states with peace between states; but the historical alternative to war between states was more ubiquitous violence (Bull 1977: 185).

Interstate war itself, one might say, turns out to be the essence of the bracketing of violence in international society - since war in this narrow sense "comprises only one area of the spectrum of possible violence" (Bull 1966: 49). So that, as Bull eventually adds, even "the idea that under a world government war would be impossible rests simply on the verbal confusion between war in the broad sense of organized violence between political units, and war in the narrow sense of international war or organized violence between states" (Bull 1977: 285).

3. The Fundamentals of War as an Institution of International Society

Although the bracketing of violence seems partly to contribute to the development of international society and partly to be the product of it, a strict relationship is to be held between the fundamentals of the two. This is the most likely reason why both Martin Wight and Hedley Bull do not put forward a specific reflection upon the fundamentals of war as an institution of international society. For war to be transformed from the basic product of anarchy into an institution, the same conditions are required which allow international system to develop into an international society.

Limited war reveals itself as the mirrored image of international society. From a general perspective, since no societies, including international society, can develop and survive unless actors know *in advance* where and when they are likely "to enjoy some measure of security against the threat of death or injury at the hands of others" (Bull 1977: 5). From an historical perspective, since the very existence of "rules to limit the wars, which have not been entirely without influence" (Wight 1979: 105), is recognized as one of the major pillars of the concrete experience of the modern (and European) international society. While, in turn, beyond the limits of the European international society, wars kept being waged without any restrictions, both in their means and in their

ends⁴ – according to the “amity lines” drawn in the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis, 1559: «‘No peace beyond the line’ became almost a rule of international law, giving freedom to plunder, attack and settle without upsetting the peace in Europe» (Wight 1977: 125).

But what are the basic conditions which make both international society and war convention possible? Or, more specifically – all the more so because the “uniqueness” of the European historical experience makes any connection with “theory” much more difficult (Viguzzi 2005: 166): what are the fundamentals of the bracketing of war within the modern international society?

(a) The first and foremost condition is the very existence of an international system, which “is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole” (Bull 1977: 9-10). Of course, an international system may exist that is not an international society – so that this condition is explicitly mentioned by Hedley Bull among the possible alternatives to the contemporary states system⁵. But an international society always presupposes an international system, while, in turn, the existence of an international system can gradually make its members be “conscious of common interests and values, conceiving themselves to be bound by a common set of rules, or co-operating in the working of common institutions” (Bull 1977: 14). This might be also the meaning of a seemingly puzzling remark by Martin Wight: “It can scarcely be denied that there is a system of states, and to admit that there is a system comes halfway to admitting that there is a society; for a society is a number of individuals joined in a system of relationships for certain common purposes” (Wight 1979: 105).

Two factors, in particular, seem to provide the strongest incentive to create common institutions and, above all, to limit competition and war. The first one, which is also a commonplace in the political, diplomatic and juridical reflection of the modern Europe (from Emmerich de Vattel to Edmund Burke up to the retrospective analysis of Carl Schmitt), is the binding force of the system itself. Since every important change – from territorial conquest to war - occurring within the system does affect all of its members, a common interest does arise to avoid all the changes (including such unlimited wars as the Thirty Years War) which the international system as a whole could not bear.

The other force is the well-known extension of the shadow of the future, made possible by the expectation of continuing interactions. When states have long dealt with each other and expect to continue doing it, “issues arise against distinctive backgrounds of past experience; they are linked to other issues being dealt with simultaneously by the same actors; and they are viewed by participants through the prisms of their expectations about the future” (Axelrod and Keohane 1985: 227). While, in turn, concern about the future helps to promote cooperation and limit competition, partly

⁴ As Martin Wight (1977, 123) puts it, “It seems to have become established within Europe, by the end of the fifteenth century, that a conquest needed to be sealed, and given legal effect, by an act of cession, normally embodied in the peace treaty concluding the war... But when Albuquerque seized Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur in 1502, no treaty of cession followed”.

⁵ In describing such hypothetical state of affairs, Bull (1977: 249) does confirm the usual relationship between international society and war convention: “There would be states, and interaction among them on a global basis, but the element of acceptance of common interests or values, and, on the basis of them, rules and institutions, would have disappeared. There would be communications and negotiations among these states, but no commitment to a network of diplomatic institutions; agreement, but no acceptance of a structure of international legal obligations; violent encounters among them that were limited by the capacity of the belligerents to make war, but not by their will to observe restraints as to when, how and by whom it was conducted..”.

because an iterated environment permits resort to strategies of reciprocity, partly because each state has to believe that its current sacrifices will in fact yield a long-run return (Jervis 1982).

These two factors have an impressive effect on the bracketing of war. When the binding power of an international system encompasses all the states, and the states expect to continue dealing with each other once the war is over, both the goals and the means of war are to be restrained in order not to jeopardize the possibility of future peace and the resumption of pre-war activities. It is not accident that the principle of the subordination of war to peace is another recurrent theme in the philosophical and juridical tradition of the European systems of states. “The sole object of warfare” as Spinoza claims “should be to secure peace, so that the sword may be sheathed when the war is over” (cit. in Clark 1982: 98). The same concern is echoed by Immanuel Kant: “no state at war with another shall permit such acts of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible during a future time of peace” (cit. in Clark 1982: 75).

(b) The existence of an international system is only a basic pre-requisite, without which both international society and war convention would be unconceivable at all. A second and more familiar fundament regards the dimension of power, all the more so because, instead of considering institutions (beginning with International Law) as the opposite of power, Bull does vehemently emphasize the strict relationship between institutions and power:

“...contrary to much superficial thinking on this subject, it is not as if this tendency of international law to accommodate itself to power politics were some unfortunate but remediable defect that is fit to be removed by the good work of some high-minded professor of international law or by some ingenious report of the International Law Commission. There is every reason to think that this feature of international law, which sets it at loggerheads with elementary justice, is vital to its working; and that if international law ceased to have this feature, it would so lose contact with international reality as to be unable to play any role at all” (Bull 1977, 92).

Nevertheless, this relationship makes the actual distribution of power all the more relevant. In fact, the development as well as the maintenance of international society and international institutions (including war) require not any distribution of power but, instead, only a balanced one – since it is the balance of power that “provides the conditions in which other institutions on which international order depends are able to operate” (Bull 1977: 117). Bull (1977: 109) quotes the international lawyer Oppenheim: “The first and principal moral that can be deduced from the history of the development of the law of nations is that a law of nations can exist only if there be an equilibrium, a balance of power between the members of the family of nations”.

It is precisely here, in the relationship with power, that war convention reconnects with other two prominent institutions of international society: the Balance of Power itself and, according with Bull, the Great Powers. There is a mutual relationship among these institutions. On the one hand, it is war (namely, hegemonic war) which selects the great powers and, afterwards, constitutes a means of preserving the balance among them. On the other hand, it is great powers that “manage their relations with one another” so as to “provide the conditions under which the system of states can endure” (Bull 1977: 208): that is, by preserving the balance of power and, when the balance is not at stake, by taking measures to avoid war, or limit it if it occurs (Bull 1977: 212).

This dependence of war convention on a balanced distribution of power leads to point out at least two patterns of distributions of power which, instead, are not suitable to the transformation of war into an institution of international society. The first one is an excessive concentration of power, in particular military power. As one single power emerges which is not comparable with others⁶, both the resort to war and its conduct cannot be restrained by strategies of reciprocity, as well as by the fear of an “echo effect”:

“International law, the diplomatic system, war and the management of the international system by the great powers assume a situation in which no one power is preponderant in strength. All are institutions which depend heavily on the possibility that if one state violates the rules, others can take reciprocal action. But a state which is in a position of preponderant power, either in the system as a whole or in a particular area, may be in a position to ignore international law, to disregard the rules and procedures of diplomatic intercourse, to deprive its adversaries of the possibility of resort to war in defence of their interests and rights, or to ignore the conventions of the comity of great powers, all with impunity” (Bull 1977: 117).

The other pattern is the opposite of the former. As a number of studies on international cooperation have emphasized, an excessive diffusion of power is so unfavourable a condition as an excessive concentration. In fact, effective reciprocity depends on the condition that players can identify defectors; that they are able to focus retaliation on defectors; and that they have sufficient long-run incentives to punish defectors (Axelrod e Keohane 1985: 235). As the diffusion of power increases, so will the number of actors that players have to take into consideration, and with it the difficulties in satisfying the foregoing conditions. Neither Wight nor Bull directly raise this point. Nevertheless, it is implicit in the role which both of them assign to the balance of power, which presupposes the existence of a *little club* of great powers. And it is all the more evident in the very difference which Bull poses between modern international society and the Hobbesian state of nature:

“... in modern international society there has been a persistent distinction between great powers and smalls. Great powers have not been vulnerable to violent attack by small power to the same extent that small powers have been vulnerable to attack by great ones. Once again it is only the spread of nuclear weapons to small states, and the possibility of a world with many nuclear powers, that raises the question whether in international relations, also, a situation may come about in which ‘the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest’” (Bull 1977: 50).

(c) The strategies of reciprocity made possible by the iteration of relations and by the balance of power affect the rational behaviour of all actors, whatever their cultures and ideologies might be. Yet a third fundament is worth considering which, instead, specifically has to do with the cultural dimension: the existence of a common culture, animating the international society and its institutions⁷.

Both Hedley Bull and Martin Wight recognize that culture plays a crucial role in distinguishing international society from international system, although they address

⁶ Bull goes so far as to deny that a single power may be defined as a great power, since “when we speak of great powers ... we imply that there are two or more powers that are comparable in status; we imply, one might say, the existence of a club with a rule of membership” (Bull 1977: 200).

⁷ A comparison could be useful with the distinction put forward by Raymond Aron (1966: 99-104) between homogeneous and heterogeneous international systems. The relationship between ideological conflict and the nature of war is analysed also in Aron (1976: 57-133; 184-222).

this topic in a quite different manner. Bull seems to be more hesitant, even though the problem of the relationship between international society and cultural homogeneity has constantly engaged him. In *The Anarchical Society*, the relationship appears to be held as unambiguous: “A common feature of these historical international societies is that they were all founded upon a common culture or civilization, or at least on some of the elements of such a civilization: a common language, a common epistemology and understanding of the universe, a common religion, a common ethical code, a common aesthetic or artistic tradition” (Bull 1977: 16). But, elsewhere, the relationship between culture and international society turns out to be more flexible, so that the question arises whether international society does actually presuppose a common culture or, instead, the common culture is (also) the result of the concrete experience of international life. The problem fails to find a definite solution. Yet it is meaningful that, in the conclusions of *The Expansion of International Society*, Bull and Watson go so far as to explicitly concede that the perception of common interests can lead to the creation of rules and institutions, even in the absence of a pre-existent common culture.

At a first sight, Martin Wight seems to be much more resolute. In *Systems of States* – where, it is worth noting, a rigid line is not drawn between the concept of states-system and the concept of international society – Wight does firmly maintain that “a states-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members. The three states-systems that we have taken as paradigms, the Greek, the Western, and the early Chinese, each arose within a single culture” (Wight 1977: 33). So that the absence of any such culture in the relations between the Hellenic *poleis* and barbarian powers such as Persia and Carthage, or in the relations between European states and the Ottoman Empire before the nineteenth century, provide the strongest case for doubting that Greeks and Persians, or Europeans and Turks, belonged to a common international society, even though they were involved in a common system of interdependences (beginning with the risk of war).

Nevertheless, it is Wight himself who points out some of the most profound ambiguities of the relationship between international society and culture. The first ones concern the very possibility of conceiving international society as a “tolerably clear and distinct kind of community”. On the one hand, since “when we examine its penumbra, look at its connections with what lies beyond it, explore the scarcely definable gradations by which it shades into its cultural and diplomatic background, it begins to lose its coherence and identity” – all the more so “when two cultures and systems of power are so closely interdependent as the Hellenic states-system and the Persian Empire” (Wight 1977: 105), or the European states and the Ottoman Empire, or Europe and Russia after the eighteenth century. On the other hand, because the cultural fundament of international society might, in turn, fade away or even break, as the impressive recurrence of *stasis* (civil war) has shown all along the European history. In these circumstances, the assumptions and attitudes which are usually confined *outside* the society are introduced *within* it, and “heretics or political opponents are assimilated to barbarians” (Wight 1977: 36).

An even more striking ambiguity surrounds the notion of common culture itself. Martin Wight puts the basic questions:

“How can we describe this cultural community? Does it consist essentially in a common morality and a common code, leading to agreed rules about warfare, hostages, diplomatic immunity, the right of asylum and so on? Does it require common assumptions of a deeper kind, religious or ideological? Is there wide variation between the common code of one states-system and of another? Or do they all belong

to the great pool of practices and platitudes, supposedly common to the human race, where men seek for Natural Law?" (Wight 1977: 34).

Yet it can also be argued that "what matters is not whether a common culture is shared, but what kind of culture it is" (Howard 1973, quoted in Vigezzi 2005: 102) – for example, whether the common culture is more or less favourable to war, or more or less interested in imposing restraints on its methods. So that it is not accident that, after emphasizing the Rationalist preference for limited war, Wight himself wonders "whether the Rationalist principle of economy in the methods of warfare is only valid when the enemy is actuated by Rationalist principles too" (Wight 1996: 219) – a remark which somehow reminds both the logic and the limits of the so-called "democratic peace".

The relationship between society and culture becomes more and more complicated, flexible, even ambiguous. Yet both Bull and Wight do not renounce to wonder how the existence of a common culture might affect the functioning of international society. As Bull (1977: 16) puts it,

"It is reasonable to suppose that where such elements of a common civilization underlie an international society, they facilitate its working in two ways. On the one hand, they may make for easier communication and closer awareness and understanding between one state and another, and thus facilitate the definition of common rules and the evolution of common institutions. On the other hand, they may reinforce the sense of common interests that impels states to accept common rules and institutions with a sense of common values".

War is the most problematic but, at the same time, the most characteristic case of a common institution. At least three major aspects of war appear to be affected by the symbiotic relationship between international society and culture.

The first one regards communication and consists in the necessity for each party to legitimate war on the basis of principles shared both by the enemy and by the "neutral" witnesses (such as the dynastic or, later on, the nationality principle). Of course, this symmetry of languages does not prevent the principle of legitimacy from being interpreted in incompatible ways – rather, this may be just the case for conflict. Nor can it be excluded that the principle turns out to be simply a pretext, the real motives being quite otherwise. Nevertheless,

"the state which at least alleges a just cause, even where belief in the existence of a just cause has played no part in its decision, offers less of a threat to international order than one which does not. The state which alleges a just cause, even one it does not itself believe in, is at least acknowledging that it owes other states an explanation of its conduct, in terms of rules that they accept. There are, of course, differences of opinion as to the interpretation of the rules and their application to concrete situations; but such rules are not infinitely malleable and do circumscribe the range of choice of states which seek to give pretexts in terms of them. The giving of a pretext, moreover, means that the violence which the offending state does to the structure of commonly accepted rules by going to war in disregard of them is less than it would otherwise be; to make war without any explication, or with an explication stated only in terms of the recalcitrant state's own beliefs – such as the Mongols' belief in the Mandate of Heaven, or the belief of the Conquistadores in the Pope's *imperium mundi* – is to hold all other states in contempt, and to place in jeopardy all the settled expectations that states have about one another's behaviour (Bull 1977: 45)".

The second feature directly regards the two traditional components of war convention - namely the *jus ad bellum* and *the jus in bello* - and, in particular, the willingness of states to recognize the *jus belli* in one another, and, thus, manage to give

legal form to enemies, clearly distinguishing them from criminals (*aliud est hostis, aliud rebellis*). Wight seems to recognize a twofold relationship between war convention and international society, on the one side, and between international society and common culture, on the other:

“The greater the cultural unity of a states-system, the greater its sense of distinctness from the surrounding world is likely to be. (...) Hence the designation of those outside the states-system as ‘barbarians’. Hence also the idea of the ‘Holy War’. (...) One is tempted to say that Just War is the norm within the states-system, the Holy War the norm between states-system. In the notion of the Just War, the premise is that all parties *have* their due rights, and war is the means of penalizing violation of right and ensuring restoration and restitution. It is a juridical conception, of war as the instrument of law. In the notion of Holy War, the premise is that the true believers *are* right, and that infidels are to be converted or exterminated. ‘Païen unt tort e chestiens unt dreit’. It is a religious conception, of war as the instrument of God’s will, or of history” (Wight 1977: 34-35).

It is true that Wight goes on asking himself whether this conception is either a characteristic of any states-systems or a specific product of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and, later on, whether it is typical not of a states-system, but precisely of those systems (empires, suzerain states-systems and so on) which are not states-systems (such as the Caliphate or the Christian Europe). But he does not hesitate to reject “such a comforting conclusion, mainly by reason of the steady expansion of the European states-system at the expense of the world’s barbarians and natives” (Wight 1977: 35). So that the difference between the bracketing of war within Europe, and the unrestrained conduct of war outside Europe, turns out to reflect both the existence and the limits of the European international society from the second half of the seventeenth century up to the end of the nineteenth.

Finally, a third and decisive feature regards the notional concept of war itself. An international society in which the states belong to the same type and do not cease to recognize a common cultural background facilitates the distinctions between war and revolution, international war and civil war, war and peace, while making the transformation of war into a notional state of affairs possible. “The distinction between war and peace is the foundation of civilized life, and its observance rests on common moral and political standards” (Wight 1979: 141).

(d) If the existence of a common culture reinforces international society by affecting the way in which states perceive one another, the last fundament of international society consists in the internal coherence among its principles, norms and institutions. In *The Anarchical Society*, Hedley Bull repeatedly insists on this point:

“... order in the great society of all mankind might in principle be attained in many other ways than through a society of sovereign states which is neither historically inevitable nor morally sacrosanct. If in fact mankind were organized as a cosmopolitan state, or a universal empire, or according to some other principle, law might play a part in identifying this other principle as the supreme and seminal one. What, however, is incompatible with order on a global scale is a welter of competing principles of universal political organization, such as existed in Europe during the period of wars of religion. The first function of law in relation to order in world politics is thus to identify one of these principles of universal political organization and proclaim its supremacy over all competitors” (Bull 1977: 140-141).

This is why both Wight and Bull claim “the incompatibility of the cosmopolitan ideal with the existence of any states-system” (Wight 1977: 88). When an international society harbours internal contradictions between its central elements, it condemns itself

to increasing failures and mounting pressures for major alterations – just like the ideas of cosmopolitan justice which Bull copes with: “Demands for world justice are therefore demands for the transformation of the system and society of states, and are inherently revolutionary. World justice may be ultimately reconcilable with world order, in the sense that we may have a vision of world order or cosmopolitan society that provides for both. But to pursue the idea of world justice in the context of the system and society of states is to enter into conflict with the devices through which order is at present maintained” (Bull 1977: 88).

This also profoundly affects the topic of war. In order to be effective, war convention needs to be consistent with the central principles of international society, while, in turn, the central principles of international society must appear to be culturally and morally plausible (Walzer 1977: 133): they must correspond to the fundamental beliefs and the most profound experiences of each era. Here did the primary relationship between interstate war and the society of states rest. If, within the modern international society, sovereign states could claim for themselves a monopoly of the legitimate use of force, it was because, at the same time, states were considered to be the *sole* and *equal* subjects of international law. While such a legal solution did presuppose a conscious removal of the problem of justice (Koselleck 1959), precipitated by the frightening experience of the civil wars of religion, and sustained by the resulting awareness that there was no consensus anymore as to what justice involved (Wight 1977: 157-159).

4. The Long Crisis of the Fundamentals and the Twin Decline of War Convention and International Society

Both Wight and Bull are fully aware that the modern solution to international cohabitation is passing through a profound (and, maybe, irreversible) crisis – so that, one might say, the categories of international system and international society become a means to reconsider this twofold crisis, resulting from the new ideological schism inside Europe, on the one hand, and by the expansion of international society outside Europe, on the other:

“Since the outbreak of the First World War, despite the illusion of the strengthening of international society created by the growth of the scope of international law and the multiplication of international organizations, it is likely that there has been a decline in the consensus about common interests and values within the states system. The ideological divisions following upon the Bolshevik Revolution, the revolt of non-European peoples and states against Western dominance, and the expansion of the states system beyond its originally European or Western confines, have produced an international society in which the area of consensus has shrunk by comparison with what it was in 1914. It may readily be imagined that in the next few decades such stresses will be placed on this remaining area of consensus that it will decline drastically or even disappear altogether” (Bull 1977: 257-258)

The crisis of international society expresses itself in the overall crisis of the classic international institutions. All the more so since both Wight and Bull do not place major emphasis upon such more recent institutions as the United Nations and the other international organizations that have been developing after the Second World War (“pseudo-institutions”, as Wight goes as far calling them) (Bull 1977: 6). This is one of the most striking differences between the British Committee and the mainstream of International Relations theory. By international institutions, the British Committee does not mean the same kind of institutions on which the so-called institutional theories of

International Relations focus. On the contrary, as Bull firmly contends, “to find the basic causes of such order as exists in world politics, one must look not to the League of Nations, the United Nations and such bodies, but to institutions of international society that arose before these international organizations were established, and that would continue to operate (albeit in a different mode) even if these organizations did not exist” (Bull 1977: xiv).

The crisis encompasses such fundamental institutions of international society as International Law and diplomacy: “Traditional diplomatic standards probably reached their highest level during the century before 1914. Since then they have steadily declined” (Wight 1979: 120). Nevertheless, it is war that seems to play the principal role. On the one hand, since it was still a war (namely, the First World War) that revealed and, at the same time, definitely allowed for the crisis of international society, while resulting in the crisis of the *old* distinctions (civil war/international war; combatants/non combatants; peace/war) and in the massive production of *new* hybrids – from “Total War” to “Cold War” (up to the so-called “Long War Against Terror”). The success of modern international society turns out to be included between two military catastrophes, the civil wars of religion at its beginning, and the First World War at its end. As Hedley Bull puts it, “the international history of this century so far may be regarded as a prolonged attempt to cope with the drastic decline of the element of society in international relations brought about by the single, catastrophic ‘accident’ of the First World War” (Bull 1977: 258).

On the other hand, war itself mirrors the paradoxical combination between reform and crisis, which has been characterizing the history of international society since the aftermath of the First World War. Actually, a radical reform has taken place in the cultural and legal dimension, epitomized by such documents as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the Nuremberg Charter, and the Charter of the United Nations, whose cumulative effect has been “to establish an emphatic prohibition of the use of force for selfish ends” (Bull 1977: 154). In fact, as the reluctance has spread to view war as a law enforcement except in cases where it is resorted to for reason of self-defence, a decisive change has occurred “from a legal regime of indifference to the occasion for war, in which it was regarded primarily as a duel, a means of settling a private difference, to a legal regime which has placed substantial limitation on the competence of states to resort to force” (Brownly, quoted in Bull 1977:154).

One might see in this radical expansion of the scope of international law an evidence of the transition from an *old* international society to a *newer* (and more mature) one, rested on the overcoming of the traditional nexus between anarchy and war. However, in practice violence has become more unlimited than at any time since the Thirty Years War. All of the major components of war convention have been crumbling. The *jus ad bellum* has been challenged by the reversal of the relationship between equality and discrimination, which had characterized interstate war in the last centuries. The former, the principle of equality among states, would require an attitude of indifference towards the purposes for which war is waged. Yet, as the conviction arises that war is either an infringement of the law or an act of law enforcement, the state who acts in the name of law cannot be put in the same conditions as the state who deserves to be sanctioned (Bull 1966: 55-57).

The latter, the principle of discrimination, would require the resort to legitimate violence to be confined to sovereign states and forbidden to all the other subjects, whatever their just causes might be. However, all along the twentieth century this

monopoly of legitimate international violence has been concretely challenged by a number of non-state political groups. Moreover, as Bull notices, from a normative point of view “what is more impressive ... is the fact that their claim of the right to do so is accepted as legitimate by a substantial proportion of international society. The society of states has not been able to muster, against this challenge to its monopoly of legitimate violence by groups that are politically motivated, the kind of solidarity it has displayed against the privately motivated international violence of classical piracy” (Bull 1977: 268-269).

The crisis of limitations is all the more evident in the case of the *jus in bello*. Its major prescriptions have been swept away by the frightening flow of Total War, which has increasingly undermined the traditional principle of non-combatant immunity, as well as the underlying soldier/civilian distinction. Even though a clear-cut ethic distinction is drawn between the two parties of the Second World War, both of them are recognized to be responsible of huge violations of the non-combatant immunity:

“Nor were our enemies in that war the only adepts at disproportionately, even perhaps pointlessly cruel and destructive, measures; just think of what American bombers did to Tokio and Nagasaki; what the Soviet Armies did to German civilians in the path of the advancing armies, and what our bombers did to Lübeck and Dresden and all who dwelt herein. And the picture gets only starker since then; recall Algeria, the Congo, Biafra, Vietnam” (Best, quoted in Vigezzi 2005: 273).

This catastrophe is too notorious to deserve any further description. Rather, Bull wonders whether it may even be reinforced by the drawing of a distinction between just and unjust causes of war, which “excludes one kind of war” but, at the same time, “sanctifies another and enhance its dignity” (Bull 1966: 55). Bull acknowledges that “there is no logical inconsistency in holding both that war should be fought only for a just cause and that it should be carried in a just way” (Bull 1966: 57). But he adds that “in their application to social life there is clearly a certain tension between these two doctrines”, since it would seem desirable that no obstacle be placed in the way of the just part, at least in the case that the unjust part is about to win⁸. All the more so if the distinction were to go so far as to place those who are fighting for an unjust cause *outside* international society, where they would enjoy no rights (Bull 1966: 59-60).

Finally, also the notional concept of war has faded away, partly owing to the growing heterogeneity of the wars of the last century (infiltration, guerrilla strife, terrorism and so on), and partly owing to the fact that a paradoxical incentive has grown to disguise war, as the legal prohibition of the resort to force has spread. It is here – for instance, in the disappearance of such a ceremonial act as the declaration of war - that any attempt to expand the scope of international law has definitely failed:

“Since 1918, more effort has been spent than ever before on delimiting the theoretical borderline between peace and war, and in defining those acts which transgress it; while in practice the borderline has become more smudged than at any time since the Wars of Religion. Today it requires a mental effort from us to regard as abnormal circumstances in which ships are sunk and aircraft shot down without warning, peaceable citizens are kidnapped and disappear, traitors flee from one side to the other bringing secrets

⁸ This tension is paradoxically confirmed by the most popular contemporary theory of Just War. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer does firmly underline the consistency between the theory of just war and the respect of the norms of the *jus in bello*. However, when faced with the imminent possibility of the victory of one side, whose victory “would be a human disaster for the other” (Walzer 2000: 253) - when “the heavens are (really) about to fall” (Walzer 2000: 231) - Walzer himself appeals to a Supreme Emergency (Walzer 2000: 251-268), in order to allow soldiers and statesmen to “override the rights of innocent people for the sake of their own political community” (Walzer 2000: 254) or the humanity itself.

and receiving moral acclaim, prisoners are tortured into apostasy, and diplomacy is replaced by propaganda” (Wight 1979: 141)

However, the causes of this crisis of war convention remain to be searched for. Like any change in the form of war, also the current one has resulted from a number of factors, some of which have nothing to do with the persistence of international society – beginning with the dramatic increase in military innovation and, eventually, the advent of nuclear weapons, which has made the very concept of “limited war” daring, if not unconceivable altogether.

Nevertheless, the impact of such factors has been strengthened by the fact that, meanwhile, also the fundamentals of international society have been collapsing – even though their collapse have followed different patterns and, above all, have had different genealogies.

(a) The first fundament – i.e. the existence of an international system, within which states expect to have continuing interactions with one another – is the most problematic one. At first sight, the growing degree of economic, environmental as well as strategic interdependence has made the international system even stronger (and, above all, more global) than at any time in the past. So that Bull can maintain that “the disappearance of the element of a system from the present pattern of universal politics could come about only as the consequence of the collapse of our present scientific, industrial and technological civilization” (Bull 1977: 260).

However, against the backdrop of this growing network of interdependences, other changes have occurred which risk of jeopardizing the iterated environment of a states system. The first one is emphasized by Martin Wight (1979: 84): “... the century between 1815 and 1914 was not so evidently a period of international stability as the eighteenth century. The foundations of international society were under attack again. More members of international society disappeared by revolution or conquest between 1859 and 1871 than during the whole century and a half between 1648 and 1795”. Needless to say that the twentieth century did not reverse this tendency. On the contrary, even some great powers disappeared, or were the object of a new land-division, in the aftermath of the major conflicts of the century: the Habsburg Empire, the German Empire and the Russian Empire after the First World War; Germany after the Second World War; the Soviet Union after the Cold War.

A second change has come from the proliferation of states resulting from the expansion of international society. The Committee’s scholars are overwhelmingly convinced that this is one of central feature of the twentieth century. Unlike the European states of the past, not always have the new states the ability to “stand on their feet” (Mackinnon, quoted in Vigezzi 2005: 58). On the contrary, they may turn out to be “quasi-states” (Jackson 1990), to which the traditional assumptions of sovereignty do not apply, including the expectation to last. Moreover, a regional system made up of weak or quasi-states is likely to become an “immature anarchy” (Buzan 1991: 174-181), characterized by the impossibility to build a strong international society on the foundations of mutual recognition and acceptance and, in case of war, by the weakening of the restraining force exerted by the expectation of future peace and the resumption of pre-war activities – i.e. the traditional principle of the subordination of war to peace.

The cumulative effect of the disappearance of old states and empires, and of the birth of new and fragile states, has been to weaken the expectation of continuing interactions among *existing* states, while making the shadow of future shorter. Yet a significant

change has affected also the binding force of the system itself. It is Martin Wight (1977: 175) who helps recognize this point, by making a vital distinction between open and closed states system – between states systems that have “indeterminate limits, usually expanding”, and are impinged upon by outside forces (as the Hellenic system was by Persia and Carthage, or the European system by the Ottoman Empire), and those systems that, having attained their maximum extension, are free of outside pressure. “The present states system,” Wight remarks, “being for the first time in history world-wide, may be called closed”. This unprecedented feature has a twofold impact on the binding force of the states system. On the one hand, it deprives it of an immense space of liberty, in which states could compete (and even fight) without disrupting their system of relations. On the other hand, the disappearance of any limit between inside and outside, as well as the absence of any outside pressure, dramatically weaken the sense of distinctness of the states system, so that the goal of the preservation of the system and society of states itself does not find the incentive of a common self-defence anymore.

(b) Also the second fundament – i.e. the existence of a balanced distribution of power – has followed an ambivalent path. As a matter of fact, the balance of power is held to have been fully operating in the international system of the second half of the twentieth century, despite the dramatic reduction of the number of great powers. As Bull (1977: 112) explicitly maintains, “it is clear that in contemporary international politics there does exist a balance of power which fulfils the same functions in relation to international order which it has performed in other periods”.

It is true that, by comparison with the past, the balance of terror between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the minor balances among the superpowers and such other powers as China or Japan, did not rest “on a common culture shared by the major states participating in it, comparable with that shared by the European great power that (had) made up the complex balances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Bull 1977: 115). Nor were they rooted in “any general agreement... on the proposition that the maintenance of a general balance of power (was) a common objective, the proposition proclaimed by the European great powers in the Treaty of Utrecht” (Bull 1977: 114). Moreover, it is true that “the preservation of peace ... by a system in which each (threatened) to destroy or cripple the civil society of the other, rightly seen as a contemporary form of security through the holding of hostages, (reflected) the weakness in international society of the sense of common interest” (Bull 1977: 126).

However, all this did not prevent the balance between the United States and the Soviet Union from developing “some agreed rules in relation to the avoidance and control of crises and the limitation of war” (Bull 1977: 115). All the more so since the balance, even though fortuitously arisen as the results of efforts on the part of each to deter the other, tended to become institutionalized as the conviction spread that it could be “preserved only by conscious, collaborative efforts to bring this about” (Bull 1977: 121).

Nevertheless, other changes were about to occur, which risked of putting in jeopardy the relationship between balance of power, international society and war convention. Both Wight and Bull witness the first one: the growth of “private” international violence and the crisis of the state monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. It is true that, according with their widespread wariness of statements that are too resolute about the

radical novelty of the present, they contend that “private international violence of this kind is not new or unprecedented; all that is clearly new is the global scale on which it takes place” (Bull 1977: 269). But, at the same time, they recognize that the fact that international violence is resorted to by an increasing number of non state actors has a disruptive impact on the functioning of international society. On the one hand, because these actors are not involved in the major balance of power, while falling beyond the reach of its strategies of reciprocity. On the other hand, because they also escape the restraints and the rules by which sovereign states are bound. As Bull (1977: 199) puts it, “international society will not be able to afford to allow these new forms of war to lie permanently beyond the compass of its rules”.

A second change was only hypothesized which, indeed, would have swept away any trace of balance: the emergence of a single dominant power in world politics. Like the bulk of his contemporaries, Bull has no difficulties in rejecting the statements of those writers that, in the mid-1960s, had begun to argue that the United States had so far outstripped the Soviet Union as to have become the global hegemony. On the contrary, “since that time the position of the United States in relation to the Soviet Union is sharply declined” (Bull 1977: 201). But he also maintains that if the United States were to become the single dominant power, not only could it no longer rightly be called a great power or superpower (Bull 1977: 201), but, moreover, the distribution of power would not be consistent anymore with the rules and procedures of international society.

(c) Two major changes, instead, were already occurring which did profoundly engage the British Committee’s experience. The first one was the disassembling of the cultural background and the related sense of shared values, typical of an international society. The most immediate factor of this collapse was the ideological split between communism and liberalism, which had arisen in Europe in 1917 but, since then, had increasingly resulted in a “global civil war” – the last and paradoxical legacy of the Western impact on the rest of the world. Actually, as Martin Wight (1977: 153-173) notices, the ideological homogeneity of Europe had already faded away since the French Revolution and the resulting conflict between the dynastic and the popular principles of international legitimacy: “... since the end of the eighteenth century, international society has been in a condition of stasis” (Wight 1979: 140). But, unlike the previous wave of international revolution, the last one has already resulted in a great war between revolution and counter-revolution, while definitely offering a different picture of international society from that typical of a society of states:

“Instead of a loose company of sovereign states, it seems one of an organic unity; individual feel international loyalties, which override national allegiance. But this more organic unity is only apparent, by a paradox, because the unity is sharply broken by a horizontal fracture. The unity of international society is thrown into sharpest relief when it is riven by an international civil war. Catholic hate Protestants, ultras hate Jacobins, Communists hate the bourgeoisie, with a fiercer passion than Frenchmen hate Germans or Americans hate Japanese”(Wight 1979: 87).

International revolutions have a comprehensive impact on the unity of international society. On the one hand, they undermine “the tacit understanding that every member of the states-system in claiming sovereignty and political independence for himself acknowledges the same claim by every other member” (Wight 1977: 36). On the other hand, “by making a stratification throughout international society”, they make “a potential stratification within every nation” (Wight 1979: 88). Moreover, according with

the usual relationship between the nature of international cohabitation and the nature of war, “international revolutions also transform the character of war”, by blurring the distinctions between war and revolution, international war and civil war, war and peace (Wight 1979: 89-90). As Wight puts it, “in revolutionary periods we find long tracts of time in which it is difficult to say whether there is peace of war: there is a diplomatic twilight of mutual suspicion and alarms, of hostile acts which do not amount to war, and of war which is prosecuted without observance of the due formalities” (Wight 1979: 90).

Nevertheless, the British Committee increasingly draw attention to the second factor of the cultural disassembling of international society: the expansion of international society beyond its originally European or Western base. The emergence of an inclusive and worldwide system of states, as well as the collapse of European centrality and dominance, are overwhelmingly recognized to be a challenge for the structure of international society. This issue was already emphasized by Martin Wight in the early phase of the Committee, and becomes so central a topic in *The Expansion of International Society* as to nearly transform the two categories of “international system” and “international society” into a means to reconsider the relations between Europe and the world (Vigezzi 2005: 295). If it is true that all international societies presuppose and require a common culture, and, in particular, the modern international society was the product of specifically Western or European experience, is the global *international system* of today still founded upon a common culture, and if not has it any possibility to survive as an *international society*? Is it our international society in process of disintegration because it has expanded beyond its originally European cultural base? Or may it find a new base in the cosmopolitan culture of so-called modernity (which Bull does not equate with “westernization”) or, instead, in a more flexible common culture arising out of “experience” itself?

Although continuously debated, the problem is left without a solution. On the one hand, the possibility is not excluded that a tendency to perceive common interests and to moderate conflicts might arise out of the intrinsic logic of industrialism, or due to the enduring Westernization (or Americanization) of the world or, indeed, owing to the increase of a *fellow-feeling* among people who have reciprocal and enduring relations. It is what Ronald Dore (1984) maintains in the last chapter of *The Expansion*, even though Dore himself recognizes that the resulting similarity in values, fashions, tastes, lifestyles is still confined to the elites, the upper classes and the bourgeoisie (mainly urban).

On the other hand, the new and multicultural system appears to be hardly consistent with the existence of a single international society (whether old or new) capable of sustaining shared values among its member, all the more so because a growing “revolt against the West” has been taking place since the beginning of the twentieth century. In *The Expansion*, it is Adda Bozeman (1984) who most strongly argues that international society is already falling to pieces, and a conglomerate is arising of different international systems, each of them founded upon different cultures and rules of coexistence. But the pessimism seems to be growing in Hedley Bull too (Vigezzi 2005: 291), and it is all the more acute in Martin Wight. In *Systems of States*, not only does he emphasize the symbiotic relationship between international society and common culture, but, when drawing his attention to the ongoing evolution of the international system, he goes so far as to recognize the emergence of a new principle of legitimacy (Wight 1977: 168-171) – i.e. a “principle of continental solidarity” – which seems to perfectly mirror the disassembling of international society. “In the sphere of legitimacy,

if not yet in the sphere of strategy, land power has triumphed over sea power” (Wight 1977: 171).

This incumbent (albeit controversial) collapse of the cultural fundament of international society dramatically affects international institutions, because “diplomatic relations between states are not a source of the mutual recognition of one another’s sovereignty, equality, independence and other rights, but they presuppose such a mutual recognition of rights and provide tangible evidence of its existence” (Bull 1977: 183). Yet it is once again war which risks of epitomizing the crisis. As combatants are not aware anymore of any cultural or ideological similarity, and as they do not even conceive the possibility to have and resume normal (and legal) relations with one another, any restriction to violence tends to be eroded. Instead of an institution of international society, war becomes a pure expression of anarchy again. Instead of a reciprocal action between combatants who recognize the *jus belli* in one another, war turns out to be (or, at least, to be perceived) as a relation between actors who do not acknowledge any reciprocity (political, cultural, at worst racial) and, therefore, do not expect the other to become a partner again – as it had always been “beyond the line” of the European international society. As John Vincent (quoted in Vigezzi 2005: 302) puts it: “How far was the war against Japan... in the 1940 seen as a race war? How far did the US realize that the Third World saw the Vietnam war as racial?”

(d) The other major change affecting the functioning of international society was the diffusion of an alternative conception of order, founded upon the universalism of so called global society and its ideas of world or cosmopolitan justice (beginning with the doctrine of human rights). Actually, this conception had always been playing a role in the history of international relations and, indeed, it had already been reinforced by the Enlightenment and, later on, by the bourgeois and liberal trust in the reunification of world made possible by the *douce commerce*. However, it was the experience of the totalitarian terror which definitely discredited the traditional concepts of sovereignty and non interference, while putting forward an overall reform of international society, epitomized by the Charter of United Nations, and characterized by a weakening of the prerogatives of states.

According to Hedley Bull, this would-be transformation has a twofold disruptive impact on the existing international society. We have already mentioned the first one: by pursuing principles which enter into conflict with the devices through which a state-system is to be maintained, ideas of world or cosmopolitan justice make international society harbour internal contradictions between its central elements and, therefore, condemn it to increasing failures:

“...has this ‘progress’ of international law been reflected in any strengthening of the role played by international law in relations to international order? Martin Wight has pointed out that the periods in which the claims made for international law are most extravagant and inflated are also the periods in which actual international practice is most marked by disorder, while in periods in which actual international relations are relatively orderly, the claims made for international law are most modest” (Bull 1977: 151).

This labyrinth of legitimacy affects war convention as well. On the one hand, even though “the tyranny of the concepts and normative principles” (Bull 1977: 275) associated with the states system continues to make interstate war be recognized as the only form of legitimate international violence, the plausibility of this solution is subject to challenge as the rights of each man, people or nation are asserted on the world

political stage over and against the claims of his state, or the state which occupies his territory. Once justice is taken into consideration again, international law might also reaffirm the prohibition for non-state actors to resort to force, but this prohibition is not consistent anymore with our fundamental beliefs and our most profound experiences. So that it is not accident that the non-state groups' claim of the right to resort to violence has been repeatedly accepted as legitimate by a substantial number of peoples and even states – from the Resistance during the Second World War, to the wars of national liberation at the times of decolonization, up to the Kosovo or the Palestinian issues in the last decade.

On the other hand, the growing uncertainty as to what principles and norms are to be prevailing in each specific conflict results in a dramatic increase of the discretionary power of the strongest actors, who alone can set the hierarchy of priorities, while deciding which non-states actors have a right to resort to violence and, instead, which ones are to be considered as “out-of-law”, “bandits” or “terrorists”. As Bull (1977: 88) notices, “international society takes account of the notion of human rights and duties that may be asserted against the state to which particular human beings belong, but it is inhibited from giving effect to them, except selectively and in a distorted way”.

The second effect of the diffusion of cosmopolitanism is somehow paradoxical. By claiming the notion of a world common justice, the cosmopolitan concept of order turns out to worsen the impact of the cultural disassembling of international society. In fact, as Bull (1977: 95) concedes, “it can scarcely be doubted that an international society that has reached a consensus not merely about order, but about a wider range of notions of international, human and perhaps world justice, is likely to be in a stronger position to maintain the framework of minimum order or coexistence than one has not”. But, he adds, the conflict between international order and demands for just change is arising in a historical situation “where there is no consensus as to what justice involves, and when to press the claims of justice is to reopen questions which the compact of coexistence requires to be treated as closed”.

Here does Bull's vehement critic stem against what he calls “radical global centralists” and their “radical salvationist model” (Bull 1977: 302-305). The strengthening of central institutions which they advocate is likely to reflect the values and interests of the presently prevailing great powers, who alone could make it a reality. Moreover, their conception of a common will or unity of purpose among the human community as a whole is actually biased by a strong (albeit unconscious) Western footprint. In their search for a wider and possibly universal consensus, the radical global centralists do not “take account of what the demands of the Third World states actually are, and (do) not consider how far they can be reconciled with the perceived interests of the other main groups of states”. Instead, they base their prescriptions “on a conversion of the whole planet to a comprehensive array of goals that reflect (their) own detailed preferences, a conversion which is to be brought about simply by (their) own and their colleagues' powers of persuasion and exhortation” – “the latest edition of the white man's burden”, according to the Indian writer, Rajni Kothari, whom Bull eventually quotes.

This is also the reason why Bull (1979) does question any attempt to recapture the just war theory, in spite of the growing lack of common moral authorities as well as of common philosophical or ethical foundations. In his review article of *Just and Unjust Wars* by Michael Walzer (1977), Bull concedes that the American philosopher is so fully aware of this problem as to explicitly disdain any inquiry into foundations.

Nevertheless, according to Bull, this self-denying ordinance about foundations leads Walzer to actually address his message “only to the limited circle of those who share his outlook” (Bull 1979, 599), while not having “anything to say as to why we should listen to him rather than to someone whose outlook is fundamentally different” (Bull, 1979, 598). Once more, the fragility of the renewed just war theory turns out to resemble the collapse of international society. On the one hand, the emphasis Walzer places upon “the legalist paradigm” as well as the obligation to respect the rules of war is to be “disputed by those more sympathetic than he is to the revolutionary causes of our times” (Bull 1979, 597), beginning with all “the oppressed, the desperate and the dissatisfied” (Bull 1994: xv). On the other hand, it is Walzer’s “Western, liberal view according to which questions about the morality of war are ultimately questions about the rights and duties of individual human beings” which does not come to grips with alternative (and, above all, non-Western) “assumptions that the ultimate test concerns the rights or duties not of individuals, but of kinship groups, the nation, or the party” (Bull 1979, 597).

5. Conclusion. The Disappearing of War and the Collapse of International Society

The end of the Cold War and the beginning of the new century have even reinforced the twin decline of war convention and international society. On the one hand, a review of the last decade is enough to show us the extent to which very few of the principles and norms of war, in a moment of truth, remain. Radical divisions have been repeatedly arising as to what a legitimate war is and should be – for instance on the occasion of Kosovo and, even more, in the case of the Iraqi war. The traditional principles of the *jus in bello* have been undermined by the continuation of the typically 20th century current towards the dissolution of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, as well by the challenges of terrorism and the policies against terrorism. Above all, the notional concept of war has continued to fade away, so that even the would-be guarantor of international order – i.e. the United States - has explicitly recognized that “the traditional, visible distinction between war and peace is less clear at the start of the 21st century” (US Department of Defence 2006: 76).

On the other hand, the traditional fundaments of international society have not ceased to be collapsing. The binding force of the international system has been further weakened by the diminishing of the strategic continuity among the regions which make up the international system, as well as by the fact that a substantive number of states are not available to have continuing relations with one another (for instance, the United States with the “rogue states”, Iran with Israel and vice versa, and so on). An extraordinary unfavourable distribution of power has arisen in which an excess of concentration – i.e. the military *hyperpuissance* of the United States – does coexist with an excess of diffusion of power – i.e. the further lowering of the threshold to violence (including catastrophic violence⁹), while drastically undermining any kind of reciprocity between combatants and, therefore, making war more and more impervious to strategic as well as legal restraints. The cultural disassembling of international society has

⁹ As also the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* of the US Department of Defense concedes, it is not the privatization of violence but, rather, the privatization of *catastrophic* violence which distinguishes the 21st from the 20th century: “Globalization also empowers small groups and individuals. Nation-states no longer have a monopoly over the catastrophic use violence” (US Department of Defense 2006: 24), as they still had at the times of the *area bombings* and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

resulted in such a growing politicization of cultural and religious identities as to transform Samuel Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilization into the ideological jargon of the so called "war on terror". Eventually, the tension has increased between the traditional norms of the states system and the cosmopolitan concept of order, both in the political culture and in international law itself.

The crisis of war as an institution reflects and, at the same time, nourishes the overall crisis of international society. On the one hand, the disappearance of any trace of (military, legal and even ethic) reciprocity among combatants arises from a more and more unequal international society, both in the distribution of power (by virtue of the unipolar moment) and in international law (owing to the shifting from the equality among states to democracy as the new, although controversial principle of international legitimacy). On the other hand, the resulting disappearance of war as a legal condition strengthens these asymmetries by clearing away any common ground for competition, not only in the military phase but also in the pseudo-diplomatic phase which precedes it. The "new" war is a war without sociability, a failing institution in a failing international society.

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