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Four Dilemmas of Contemporary World Politics

For a long time the dilemma *par excellence* in inter-national politics was the security dilemma, that was so labelled by J. Herz, but was already clearly individuated by Thomas Hobbes three centuries earlier. In much more recent times, two other dilemmas were analysed: the development and the environment dilemma (Senghaas 1994) Now, we can think that these two dilemmas (development and environment) conflated in a single one. The first dilemma had a proper meaning only in a situation where domestic politics could be sharply distinguished from international politics: in the first one there is a legitimate and a non-legitimate violence, whereas in the international arena all legitimate actors can use violence.

In the contemporary political condition, the problem is not only about actors, that must defend their security, but also about the use itself of violence: when is violence legitimate. So, the security dilemma, we have to deal with the violence/non-violence dilemma. The second dilemma is between development and environment. This is more clear: for state and non-state actors, the choice is between actions that can damage the environment and actions and seem to have negative consequences on national and sometimes global economy.

These two dilemmas bring to more general dilemmas (or we could say perhaps, meta-dilemmas). First, we have a legitimacy problem. What are the actors that are legitimate to decide (if there are any) about the use of violence, and who is entitled to

decide about the development-environment dilemma? It seems that those actors or political groups or institutions that are legitimate are not effective, and vice versa. In a transitions historical period in the past, it was quite clear what political group was going to assume the ruling function (with effectiveness and legitimacy): the State. Its legitimacy and effectiveness had their supporters and bards: Machiavelli and Hobbes, for example.

However, a deeper dilemma confronts contemporary political and social action: why, to what purpose should we act. Machiavelli gave this basic question an answer, with his idea of public morality. In the last two centuries lots of ideologies fought against each other, Now however, when the postmodern discourse has become common sense, what is left besides religion. Is criticism of ideologies a good basis for social action? Is possible effectiveness without sense?

I do not intend to answer these question (it is probably impossible), but I intend to give them some meaning in the context of contemporary world politics.

1. From the Security to the Violence Dilemma

The dilemma that defines inter-state politics is the security dilemma. This dilemma was so defined by John Herz (1950), but was already individuated by Thukidides and, above all, by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, both in *De cive* and *The Leviathan* described the state of nature as a condition where every individual is obliged to defend himself from a possible future aggression by anticipating that aggression:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and

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the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (*Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. XIV).

It has been widely discussed whether Hobbes considered the state of nature among individuals as a situation that had really taken place in the history of humankind, or a theoretical conjecture to emphasize the dangers of the absence of a central authority, and legitimize this central authority. However, for Hobbes, at all times states have been among themselves in a state of nature:

But though there had never been any time wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another, yet in all times kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbours, which is a posture of war. But because they uphold thereby the industry of their subjects, there does not follow from it that misery which accompanies the liberty of particular men (*ivi*).

What we call *security dilemma* is generated by this posture as gladiators, but was explicitly and more precisely defined only three centuries after the *Leviathan* by John Herz in a famous and quoted essay:

Wherever such anarchic society has existed – and it has existed in most periods of known history on some level – there has arisen what may be called the “security dilemma” of men, groups or their leaders. Groups of individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on (Herz 1950, p. 157).

These classical quotations express the essence of the security dilemma. This idea and its consequences in inter-state politics have been developed and explored in many decades of scientific and political inquiry by authors like Arnold Wolfers (1962), Robert Jervis (1976, 1078) or Barry Buzan (1991).

However, it is not my aim to survey these developments, but to stress the waning of this dilemma into something more basic with the decline of the territorial

state. It was the same John Herz that stressed the demise of the territorial State in the nuclear age. Even though other authors – from Norman Angell (1910) to David Mitrany (1946) – had analysed, forecast or advised for the rising of new forms of international organisation (de Wilde 1990), this was criticised as “idealism” or “utopianism” by the prevailing school of Realism in IR. The rising confrontation in the Thirties, the Second World War and the Cold War seemed to (re-)establish the theoretical and political primacy of the territorial State and of power politics. However, one of the leading authors of classical Realism (Herz 1957) started to talk and write about the “demise” of the territorial state from the point of view of security: according to his view, the very existence of nuclear weapons destroyed one of the foundations of the territorial state: its impenetrability, the idea of borders as hard shells. However, the existence of nuclear weapons and the waning of territorial security as it was conceived during the classical age of the State is not the only reason that leads us to talk about a decline of the security dilemma.

We can talk about the crisis of the functions of the territorial state from many points of view: beyond the issue of nuclear weapons, the (in)capability of the State to manage national economy and financial flows, the intrinsically trans-national character of environmental and migration problems, the issue of organised crime, just to bring some trivial example. Scholars like Bertrand Badie (1995, 1999) talk about *the end of territories* and *a world without sovereignties*. The crisis of sovereignty has been echoed by the questioning and deconstruction of the idea of sovereignty in IR and political theory².

The crisis of the territorial state implies the fall of the conceptual delimitation that makes it possible, in the modern framework, to define different types of legitimate violence. The division inside/outside makes possible the division between the realm where there is a monopoly of legitimate violence, and an anarchic arena of many actors that can use violence for self-defence. Formally, in this second arena, the conditions for the legitimate use of violence are provided by international law. This is only one part of

² In IR see for example Mendlowitz, Walker 1990, Walker 1993.

the story: as it was clearly evidenced by K. Schmitt (1950), the formation of the modern state system in Europe was made possible by the parallel disappearing of the idea of *bellum iustum* (just war) and the importance of the concept of *iustus hostis*: it was important the legitimacy of a certain authority to wage war according to some limiting rules able to tame – at a certain degree– the violence of war itself (*Hegung des Krieges*).

However, if the border between these areas is not clear cut, a double problem arises: the irruption of the concept of legitimate violence in the international arena, and the difficulty to avoid war in any domestic context. Moreover, in the grey area between the “domestic” and the “international”, is there any possibility to use legitimate political violence, or to avoid non-legitimate political violence? This dilemma is particularly evident in the case of failed states. If no state authority is really available, than domestic violence runs out of control, and the country is a battleground between warlords, organised crime, would be political actors and so on. However, since – at least nominally – a political authority exists, an external intervention is always contested on the ground of sovereignty. Other objections are often put forward as objections against war, even when a war is already going on in the concerned country.

This is a difficult situation both for Realism and pacifism. Realism is – implicitly or explicitly – based on sovereignty, and we have seen above the difficulties that arise in this respect. Un considered realist thinking, in a world characterised by many grey areas (with respect to sovereignty, risks to bring back us again in a *bellum omium contra omnes*.

However, even pacifism has its own problems. Pacifism as non violence can reject war because it can draw a clear-cut distinction between within and without. So, war between sovereign states is rejected (Hobbes’ sword of war), but the legitimate monopoly of violence (Hobbes’ sword of justice) is usually – at least implicitly – accepted. Obviously non violent thinkers and movement opt for forms of State and

control that minimise the use of violence in the enforcement of the rule of law, but they do not protest, for example, against the existence of some judiciary system³.

However, if the border between within and without wanes, we cannot think of two realms of violence, regulated by different logics. We must start to think about a legitimisation of the use of violence that should not depend on the idea of sovereignty.

2. The development-environment dilemma

A dilemma that can be considered from the perspective of two different types of security is the choice between – often short and medium range – economic objectives, and – often medium and long range – environment issues. From this point of view, it is obviously a contradiction between economic and environmental security⁴. However, this type of dilemma is often conceptualised as a public goods dilemma, i.e. a prisoner dilemma (Ordeshook 1989). The most elementary form of the dilemma can be exemplified by the purchase of any kind of filter for the emission gases of a car. Obviously this purchase has a certain cost. The rational decision maker has to make a calculation taking into account the economic costs of the device and the environmental costs of the pollution not purchasing the device. In a simple two players situation, let c be the cost of one item and p the evaluation of the environmental damage that every player has to suffer for each defection. Let defection (D) be the decision not to install the filter, and cooperation (C) the other choice. Then the matrix of the game is:

	C	D
C	c, c	$c+p, c$
D	$p, c+p$	$2p, 2p$

³ I think that in principle non-violent thinkers like Theodor Ebert or David Thoreau reject (implicitly or explicitly) any form even of potential use of violence, but developed this rejection only from the point of view of resistance to power, not from that of social order.

⁴ The classic reference on sectors of security is Buzan, Waever, de Wilde 1998.

Obviously, the subjective evaluation of the costs is a basic factor to calculate the equilibria of the game. It is however reasonable to think that for the single decision maker the economic costs for the purchase of a single device exceed the subjective environmental damage caused by unfettered emissions of one car. Thus, the cost of a single device is higher than the perceived environmental damage for a single defection. Thus, we have the following inequalities:

$$c > p;$$

$$c + p > 2p.$$

These make clear that the game has (as it is well known) the structure of a prisoner's dilemma, and thus defection is the dominant strategy. The same structure arises in a n -players environmental dilemma. Let n be the number of players, and $j < n-1$ the number of players opting for a strategy of defection (excluding the i -th player) . Then you have the following expression for the utility of the i -th player:

$$u_i(C) = -c - jp$$

$$u_i(D) = -(j+1)p.$$

Recalling that $c > p$, we get:

$$u_i(C) = -c - jp < -p - jp = -(j+1)p = u_i(D).$$

It is so evident that the defection, as in any n -players prisoner's dilemma, is the dominant strategy. Now, you could ask how and why the dilemma was overcome in absence of a central authority enforcing its own decisions, for example in the case of emissions. The first steps in global environmental policies, like the Stockholm Conference in 1972, were not in any way effective.

However, the issue of the depletion of the ozone layer can be considered as a good example of effective global environment policy⁵. The history of the Montreal protocol, its implementation and improvement shows problems and opportunities in dealing with environmental questions. The problem arose when (during the second half of the 1970s) when sufficient experimental evidence was accumulated that proved a reduction of the ozone layer in the stratosphere, and at the same time in the scientific community an agreement spread, that gases used in refrigerators, in air conditioning

equipments could damage the ozone layer in the high atmosphere, that is necessary for the existence of life⁶

The first working group gathered in 1981 and the first convention, signed in Vienna in 1985, dealt only with research cooperation. Only unmistakable and worrying data in 1985 made possible the conclusion in 1987 of the Montreal protocol (later amended with stronger restrictions). Even though the return of the ozone layer to its pre-1970 is still to be achieved, it is now quite certain that the measures taken by the protocol have been successful.

This success story notwithstanding, the history of the Kyoto protocol shows the dark side of the story. The lack of a proper institutional setting makes the negotiation and implementation procedure particularly awkward. We can see two or more parallel and not always interacting processes: in the scientific community, in the public opinion, and among decision makers (at different level and in different places). First of all, we have the development of the discussion on a certain issue and the formation of a consensus in the scientific community. If the issue is of public interest, obviously the media start to write or to talk about it. Often journals like *Scientific American* (or equivalent) write on the subject. The less responsive environment are (or perhaps were) the political decision makers. In the case of the emissions threatening the ozone layer. If the public and the expert opinion puts a sufficient pressure, pure and applied research centres develop technological alternatives (in our case: devices that do not use CFCs, PFCs and so on). However, the element that let decision makers understand the relevance of the problem was probably the extension of the “hole” in the ozone layer, and its impact (in terms of skin cancers) on global health. The fact that made possible the protocol was the development of alternative technologies, and the success of the protocol (in terms of inversion in the trend of the thinning of the layer) brought about corrections in the direction of stronger limits in emissions damaging the ozone layer.

⁵ See www.unep.org/ozone/.

⁶ Ozone is tri-atomic oxygen whose molecules scatter incident ultra-violet radiation.

On the contrary, the case of the Kyoto protocol and of global climate changes brought about by the increasing emissions of greenhouse gases makes it clear the difficulty to overcome the development/environment dilemma.

Dieter Senghaas (1994, p. 154 ff.) puts the question, whether environmental problems will be “structure-forming” (*strukturbildend*) in the future international system. My opinion is that the “development-environment” dilemma does not affect directly the *structure* of the international system. However, it points to a very basic issue of international politics: the effectiveness of the territorial state. From this point of view, as we shall see in the next paragraph, it involves the deep structure (Buzan, Jones, Little 1993) of the system, i.e. the type of units of the system and their mutual relationship.

3. The efficiency-legitimacy dilemma

If we look at the dilemmas dealt with in the previous paragraphs from the perspective of legitimacy, we can see a contradiction between legitimacy and efficiency. For example, what can be considered the only universal and universally acknowledged inter-national source of legitimacy, the United Nations, has a decisive lack of efficiency with respect to intervention in hot crises. This unquestionable fact was highlighted for example by the crisis and war in the Persian Gulf (Kuwait-Iraq 1990-1991), by the wars in former Yugoslavia (the Croatia-Bosnia war, 1991-1995, and the war for Kosovo, 1999), and by the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the subsequent collapse of Zaire (now: Democratic Republic of Congo), to bring only the most evident examples⁷.

In the first case (whatever your opinion might be on the decision to go to war against Iraq in 1991 to re-establish Kuwait's sovereignty) the UN apparatus was not able to fulfil one of its basic functions: the defence of its members' sovereignty. It is well known that chapter VII of the Charter, that deals with the military structure of the

⁷ The US war against Iraq, the regime change in Baghdad and the ongoing civil war do not concern directly this dilemma, but a more general problem of the legitimacy of the use of force for “moral” objectives.

Organisation, is totally unimplemented. In order for Kuwait to regain its independence and sovereignty, it was necessary that the US and her allies formed a political military-coalition that got its legitimacy to wage war by a resolution of the UN Security Council. Thus, where there is legitimacy, there is no efficiency: the UN is not able to fulfil entirely its functions. On the contrary powerful states or alliances have the means to sustain those aims, but their legitimacy to do so is at least dubious.

Something analogous happens with respect to environmental issues, when state representatives do not find an agreement. States have legitimacy to decide on environmental regulations on their territory, but (without a general agreement) you would need a supranational or universal authority to act with efficiency without going through exhausting bargaining. In this case the situation is in some sense even worse (or better?), because nobody can enforce decisions without a general and comprehensive agreement. The control on environmental issues can be directly managed only by institutions, like the State and its local agencies, that have an effective control of the territory. Thus, whereas in the case of military-security issue the UN can give the mission out by contract to a coalition (as it was the case of Kuwait), or give a kind of *ex-post* legitimisation (as it was the case for Kosovo), as for environment the agreement of the involved actors seems to be the only possible way (in the present situation).

Before discussing possible proposed solutions of this dilemma, we must take into account the possibility that we have simply to live with it. As a matter of fact, the fusion of legitimacy and efficiency has not always been the case in world history. For example, during the European Middle Ages legitimacy laid with the Pope and the Emperor, whose immediate political and administrative efficiency was limited⁸. The effective political authority laid in Italy and Germany with city elites, and with different types of local and regional landlords, whereas in the forming territorial national states laid more and more with the king (of France, England, Castilla, Aragona, Hungary, ...). However, sovereignty and political power were more distributed than concentrated, whereas basic legitimacy was mainly concentrated in the two “universal powers”. The

effort of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, from Friedrich I to Friedrich II, to implement an effective authority in both the German and the Italian area was totally unsuccessful, as it was Boniface VIII's attempt to enforce a kind of theocracy. i.e. the total submission of political power to the Pope⁹.

Something analogous happened for most part of the history of classical Islam, where legitimacy was concentrated in the person of the caliph (*amir al-mu'minin*), whereas political and administrative efficiency was often distributed among different local sultans, pashas and so on. Even one of the greatest and richest Moslem empires, the Moghul's empire in India, had a pure dynastic source of legitimacy, whereas the ultimate source of legitimacy laid elsewhere.

This problem was given an original solution by the formation of the territorial State. The State provided at the same time the optimal space scope for a capitalist economy, a good balance between concentration of capital and coercion (Braudel 1979, Tilly 1990), and a legitimate framework for the decision making. The efficiency and legitimacy of the territorial State (and in particular of the nation State) have lasted for a relatively long period of time. However, it is clear that this balance between efficiency and legitimacy has gone, at least for the time being. We have various types of reactions or proposed solution to this dilemma, that we can name "reactionary", minimalist, federalist, universalist¹⁰.

The "reactionary" solution is the illusion to take again control of our social environment going back to some sort of illusionary primary political community. This solution was in a sense fashionable (from a political point of view) in the 1980s (in Western Europe) and the 1990s (in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe), but the actual implementation of the solution proved to be either impossible (not enjoying a

⁸ Obviously we refer to the Pope as the leader of Western Christendom, because its efficiency as the sovereign his territorial domains was of the same type of other princes.

⁹ On this problem, best refer to classic middle age authors like Dante Alighieri (*Monarchia* and the political ideas to be found in the *Divina Commedia*) and Marsilio da Padova, whose *Defensor pacis* – although supporting the authority of the emperor – marks the transition towards more modern discussions.

¹⁰ For the last three, see Habermas 1999.

sufficient consensus¹¹), or economically disadvantageous, or, in the worst case, leading to war and disaster.

The minimalist solution is the governance approach. This is nothing more than an improved institutional setting, and has its foundations basically in functionalism and (neo-)institutionalism. It aims at strengthening states and international institutions making cooperation (and then problem-solving) easier.

The construction of the European Union is an attempt to build a political community, or at least a type of political entity, that can provide a new type of solution to this dilemma. The generalisation of this experience would give a new world of approximately equal actors.

Cosmopolitan democracy is obviously the universalist solution. It is certainly the best response to the issue of legitimacy. What about efficiency?

4. The meaning dilemma

As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the strength of the territorial nation state in its age of splendour was in the fact that it was able to solve the violence dilemma (by means of the creation of the security dilemma) and efficiency-legitimacy dilemma.

The formation of territorial states originated in a second moment an ideology and a form of identity (national identity) that prompted a solution for a relevant question in a modernising world: the question of the meaning of social action. In a traditional society, the meaning of social action is provided by tradition, that often takes the form of religious systems of beliefs. For a relatively long period of time (since the French revolution to the end of the 20th century) the basic political unit (the territorial state) managed to monopolise – at least as a matter of principle) identities, allegiances, and the capability to manage at best the basic problems of political communities (internal and external security, later welfare). At the beginning of the 21st century, the unity of

¹¹ This is obviously the case of the *Lega Nord* in parts of Northern Italy.

efficiency and legitimacy broke, and national ideologies, after a short lived revival, seem to be losing their appeal. However, it does not seem that universalist ideas of human rights, rule of law, democracy can be a valid substitution for previous specific identities.

A paradoxical fact happened: on one side the type of criticism of all ideologies that pervades the whole work of Nietzsche, the *plaque tournant* of post-modernism (Habermas 1985), has become a widely spread way of thinking. On the other, Nietzsche's main enemy, religion, has remained the only survivor after this great extinction of ideologies.

The question of meaning was put clearly by Max Weber (I would say: as usual in modern social sciences) in the opening pages of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*:

‘Meaning’ may be of two kinds: it may refer first to the actual existing in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or the average or approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors; or secondly to the theoretically conceived *pure type* of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action (Weber 1922, English transl. 1978, p. 4).

Here I refer mainly to the second meaning of the word ‘meaning’. However, if we find that it is difficult to find theoretical *pure types*, the universe of meaning can be pulverised to a multiplicity of subjective meanings.

If we take into consideration the three answers to the efficacy-legitimacy dilemma, we can see that they offer some insight into the last dilemma. The multi-level governance idea points at a post-modern world of multiple identities, the regional integration points at a new identification of political community, the cosmopolitan idea points at universal values.

In a world ruled by a system of multi-level governance individuals and groups can give a meaning to their political action according to many different belief systems. The plurality of places and spaces of decisions makes possible multiple identities and allegiances. In a world of (nation-)states decision-makers, diplomats and military people justify their action mainly with reference to the interests and values they attribute to their national community, and sometimes try to identify this with universal

values¹². In a world managed by means of multi-level governance national allegiance would remain a basic element giving meaning (or perhaps more frequently some legitimacy), but people (although paying lip service to some conventional “correctness”) could have a world of meaning for each action. The problem would be obviously be a difficulty of communication.

Obviously the case of regional integrations would be relatively simple, because it would propose something similar to a world of states. However, the discussion on European identity in the framework of the European treaty proved the difficulty to create by means of a diplomatic process a shared universe of meaning. Unfortunately, in history shared beliefs take form in processes lasting for centuries and usually implying a lot of *Blut und Eisen*.

Finally, universalist visions like cosmopolitan democracy do not seem to be able to provide a meaning for political action to more than intellectual elites (at least so far).

However, there is always the possibility to revert to strongly exclusive universes of meaning. From this point of view, religion is the most easily usable “tool”, especially in the form of fundamentalism. The temptation of fundamentalism is present not only in situations where nationalist or third-world-ist ideologies failed, and this is obviously the case of Islam. It also the case, for example, of those who define themselves (in Italy) as *atei devoti*, i.e. pious atheists. That does not mean that they practice atheism as a kind of religion. On the contrary, although they do not have a firm faith in the Christian God, they define their identity as (Catholic) Christians because this would be the only means to give a weakened Europe the possibility to resist the assaults of a radicalised Islam.

My personal opinion is (as it is probably clear from the paper) that the territorial state was able for a certain period of time to give a solution to many of these dilemmas. The violence dilemma was reduced to the much more manageable security dilemma (partially tamed by the reduction of violence in intra-Europeans wars until 1914). The impact of human activity on environment was not relevant. Efficiency, legitimacy and

¹² This attitude was smashed by H.J. Morgenthau (198?, p

meaning were condensed for a while (from the macro-historical point of view) in a single institution. Nothing tells us that the same miracle (achieved through centuries of wars) can be attained again.

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