

# RHETORIC AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AN INTRODUCTION

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## Abstract

A rhetorical interpretation of international relations and conflicts necessitates to take into consideration three main aspects of what anthropologist Mauss called "international life" – cultural features that allow human groupings to argue with one another across borders. The first aspect concerns the instability of international glossaries to instrument diplomacy; the second aspect is the pre-conceived notion that peace, or non-conflicting "relation," is a normal state for arguing among nations; the third aspect pertains to the belief that, owing to globalisation, the same modes of persuasion operate indiscriminately. The French Revolution provides an excellent illustration of all three aspects.

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The inspiration for this issue on the rhetorical shape of international relations or conflicts comes from an intuition of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, in a modest *Note sur la notion de civilisation* (1974) published in 1913 in *Année sociologique* on the brink of a war that ruined once and for all the Vienna system which, precisely, had given their first, comprehensive and self-reflective shape to modern international relations.

In the course of a discussion on the trans-national concept of “civilisation,” defined as another level of *vie collective*, in which some social phenomena exceed immediately perceived, field-work related, boundaries, and express “systematic solidarity” between apparently diverse cultures, the founders of positive sociology and anthropology have this laconic sentence: “*La vie internationale n’est qu’une vie sociale d’une espèce supérieure*” (Durkheim and Mauss 1974, 455).<sup>1</sup> Of course, in subsequent papers (pp. 456-523) written after the Great War, as the Wilsonian system refashioned international relations, the pair engaged in debates with a number of anthropologists on definitions of “civilisational phenomena,” such as totemic culture, and they lost track of their fundamental idea: that international relations are a form of social life. Instead of developing an anthropology of international relations, they were content with describing aspects of local, then called “primitive” cultures, as keys to “civilisational areas.” What has been lost is an anthropology of international life.

However, the question remains. Can international life be looked at not through the Morgenthau’s lense of *Politics Among Nations* (1948), which grounded the discipline called “international relations,” but by paying due attention to the Durkheim-Mauss’s intuition that international life expresses anthropological characters? One key aspect would be how nations talk to each other, how they transact in words. It would be the rhetorical shape of international life – and it is the subject matter of the contributions presented here.

For the purpose of this issue no distinction has been made between international relations and international conflicts, and this deserves some explanation. Only an optimistic view of history would hold, to speak like semioticians, that peace is the “marked” term. “International relations,” a social science minted and enriched in the aftermath of the most recent large-scale European civil war, is a propitiatory expression fabricated to dispel the precedence of conflicts and lull nations into quietude. We do not need to evoke authorities – Medievalist Duby’s insights in early Medieval *werra* as a seasonal economic process (1990), Marxist *doxa* on imperialism, Lewis’s analysis of *harb* as an essential element of Islam (1991), nor even the Hegelian-Clausewitzian concept that structured Cold War thinking and remains to date the last general doctrine – to back up the idea that war is more the norm than the exception, and consequently “international relations” functions like a rhetorical commonplace, not to say “imminent war.”

It may well be that a psycho-sociology of “international relations” could benefit from considering Lacan’s definition of love and sex, that “sex is no relation” (“*Il est impossible de poser le rapport sexuel*”; Lacan 1975, 14). We would then suggest that “there are no international ‘relations,’” merely speech manoeuvres, akin to a lover’s speech, produced to entertain the mirage of a world in which humanity needs to respect the Other and fails with due regularity, and therefore resorts either to a realist doctrine of States’ ends and means, or to a “legalist” doctrine of global soli-

parity (Beitz 1979). Lacan's argument that lovers' acts of (self-)persuasion sustain the illusion that sex can create a relation and restore some lost "unity" can be transferred to international "unity." Both are illusory and, the more we argue for it, the stronger is the damning presence of its lack, as Lacan describes it. A Lacanian critique of the United Nations may go further than any, non-realist, attempt at reforming that institution, caught indeed between realism and legalism, and premised on a fundamental lack. The un-discoverability of weapons of mass destruction is the best example, so far, of the damning presence of a lack.

One may also regret that current debates on international relations, namely "globalisation" and "ethical trade," make no reference to the Stoics' notion of *oikeiôsis*, the conciliatory, rational, "familiarity" that sustains our natural inclination to others, translated by the Stoa into cosmopolitanism. It would impart supporters and critics of globalisation a Stoical sense of restraint, and a better care in their uses of arguments. One may also wish to draw attention to yet another rhetorical problem, i.e. how the Germanic/Latin dual qualification "globalisation-*mondialisation*" underscores different options on a rhetorical turn in international relations. The word "globalisation" is a trope – as cultural anthropologists would put it (Fernandez 1986) – yet a stop-gap solution to avoid tongue-twister "worldisation." Yet, "worldisation" would have the merit to draw attention to the time-dimension inherent, according to Schelling, to the Germanic series *Welt-world-wereld-v?rld*. To think of "globalisation" in this way, as a trope for time, is to think of humanity having pressing needs, of history being activated by politics of time-frames, of money as the agent of better time fulfilled. By contrast, the Latin series *mundus-monde-mundo-mondo* opens another line of reflection: it partakes to a notion summarised by Kant in his *Dissertation of 1770*, "a world is a whole that is part of nothing." In this case, the world is a system of which we are parts and in which we play parts, without any striving to any particular achievement beyond that (David 2004). It could be worthwhile to analyse debates about globalisation in terms of these two tropes – one of time, one of space – and to investigate their rhetorical structures.

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For the sake of illustrating the rhetorical shape of international relations or conflicts I would like to take one example. It is drawn from the French Revolution or, rather, from William Pitt's response to this international event, in the speeches he delivered at the Commons between 1793 and 1801. The Revolution relegated the *ancien régime* international order to a Hegelian "cemetery of History" and created a new language to express it.

Pitt's "orations" did mark a high point in English political rhetoric, before Britain became an essential component of the new Continental power game in the nineteenth century. To a large extent his speeches created arguments that would allow Britain to conceive her international role. Pitt's speeches were an attempt made by an extraordinary public speaker to try and make sense out of events on the other side of the Channel, for himself and for his peers. Pitt set himself the task to articulate arguments that would provide the English professional political class with a common knowledge regarding the Revolution, upon which politicians could build deliberation, and to create a shared language concerning extraordinary events English politics had no frame of reference for, in spite of the Glorious Revolution

and the American Independence. Pitt's speeches were, in sum, a rhetorical response to the Revolution's new world order and to its arguments.

To use Frege's famous distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, "sense" and "reference," Pitt, as deliberator, and his colleagues with him had a "sense" of how a revolution looked like, yet the *Bedeutung* affirmed by the French revolutionaries seemed incomprehensible to them (Frege 1980).

In others words, Pitt was faced with an onerous rhetorical task – to instruct the Commons, in order to move them into formulating a prudential response to this new turn in international relations. So doing, Pitt took charge of the three canonical "offices" of an orator – to teach, move, and advise. More so because he realised that the international crisis created by the Revolution stemmed from the fact that it declared itself "universal." In addition, the Revolutionaries asserted that theirs was the only rational language for politics. Dissident or hegemonic, their declaration created a rift within language shared by States, it introduced uncertainty with regard to the persuasive means of traditional diplomacy. Literally, there no longer was a common idiom.

In a speech delivered in February 1793, following "acts of hostility without previous notice" (Pitt, 18) by the Republic considered tantamount to a declaration of war – hence, a debate at the Commons at the King's command, and Pitt's speech – Pitt articulated the rhetorical stakes of the Revolution in terms of redefining the idiom of international relations and conflicts. His argument rests on two main points: (1) the French Convention's call, of November 1792, "offering fraternity and alliance to all people who wish to recover their liberty ... was a decree hostile to the human race" (p. 20); (2) the refusal of the French ambassador's letters of credence was based on the French "taking every opportunity to separate the King of England from the nation, and by addressing the people as distinct from the government" (p. 31).

Pitt clearly saw how the Republic, territorially and ethically created after her popular army's victory at Valmy in September 1792 (the Republic effectively began on September 22), now organised as a government by assembly alone, had introduced two radically new, linked, elements – a "system," as Pitt put it (p. 32), in international relations: universality of principles and affirmation of peoples' entering directly into deliberation with one another.

This two-fold opening up of international relations, which can only lead to conflicts about "the human race" so long as the Republic exists – indeed, the Convention, when the Constitution was approved in June 1793, voted not to dissolve itself until the "wars" were over – was compounded by the publicity of the French Convention's debates. At the time of the reactionary movement that followed the fall of Robespierre, Pitt, moving against "pacification" in the face of the ever-victorious revolutionary expansion in Europe, reflected on "the publicity of the proceedings of the French convention ... [as] a source of outrage, horror, and disgust to every feeling heart" (Pitt, 93). The open-ness of the Republic's new understanding of a diplomacy that addressed "calls" directly to nations was also a very public one indeed. The Convention debated in public, in the belief that international matters, usually the domain of *arcana imperii*, must be heard across "borders," that is, lines of oppression.

As Pitt indicated, "I will not acknowledge such a republic" (Pitt, 94). A reason

he repeatedly put forward resided in the idiosyncrasies of the French political vocabulary, the changing nature of its government and, in general, the existence of a written constitution which made it mandatory, at least on paper, for an elected government to ask for popular assent if the “integrity of the Republic” was imperilled by an international treaty – on that occasion, in 1796, Pitt addressed the Commons with the French Constitution in hand, and expressed surprise at provisions for “relations with foreign powers” being made in the Constitution, as for him these were not constitutional matters, like “municipal” organisation (p. 222).

In his speech of February 1800, following Bonaparte’s assumption of consular power, Pitt provided a remarkable summation of his many speeches on why and how the Republic was “exhibiting nothing fixed, neither in respect to men nor to things” (p. 318). Yet a word, a rhetorical commonplace, underscored his argument regarding the untrustworthiness of the Republic in terms of international relations, “security” (p. 284). Now, as the Consulate offered an example of stable, if “despotic,” government, and evoked a set of rhetorical commonplaces a political class versed in the Classics could identify or relate to a consular republic, Pitt seemed to accept its language; at least, now the regime was far more reliable, even if stricken by “perpetual fluctuation” (p. 317) it remained unpredictable. “Security” became possible, a matter for negotiations, and diplomatic relations could proceed with some degree of regularity, a necessary ingredient to calculate means, “which prudence could suggest” (p. 433) “to obtain that which was next best” (p. 431). Diplomacy, to some extent, was restored. In other words, accused in 1801 – as peace was about to be signed – with “inconsistency” as he still held that a Bourbon restoration was the only long-term solution for “security” – similarly he had advocated, in 1799, “the Deliverance of Europe” led by the Russian emperor, in the name of a “common cause” (pp. 283-285) – Pitt admitted that the language of international relations had changed. The Revolution had forced him to consider a new rhetoric for conflicts, in which “insecurity,” both military and rhetorical, not “security,” an expression of propitiation, played the decisive role. The international “common cause,” the forerunner of the new international order hammered out at the Congress of Vienna (Krueger and Schroeder 2002) that rolled France, no longer a Republic, back to her 1792 borders and was rhetoricised by Metternich as a “true fraternity,” was an argument for security inasmuch as international means of persuasion had been rendered unstable and insecure.

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The collection of essays presented in this issue offer six treatments of a sort of rhetorical anthropology of international relations, bound by the same concern Pitt the Younger formulated: Do we really understand one another’s modes of persuasion? The first three papers analyse fundamental tensions. Robert Hariman opens the argument by showing how today’s Western imperial power, the United States, undergoes a confrontational process of assuming the rhetorical trappings of political prudence as “performance” when it has to re-invent, prompted by the Iraq affair, international relations. By contrast, François Jullien exposes how Western rhetoric, which emphasises a face-to-face debate, enters in a tension with Chinese “obliquity,” or the military and diplomatic art of pre-empting a frontal approach to debate. The implication is that international relations are not thought in China as

they are in the rest of the world. However, to help us better assess the Western philosophical framework of “war among nations,” Barbara Cassin presents a fundamental tension, the founding conflict between Athens and Rome, conceptualised as a conflict between democratic rhetoric and imperial cleansing of deliberation. These three rhetorical templates have one element in common – the search for mastery among imperial powers. The next three contributions look at a retreat, as it were, from this rhetoric of mastery. Erik Doxtader analyses how the South African remarkable experience has placed Africa’s power house in a strange position: how to argue for “reconciliation” in Africa without posing South Africa as its prudent voice. Similarly, Maurice Charland and Michael Dorland reflect on how Canada’s ironic vision of her own place in the world allows for a prudential rhetoric that, not unlike Chinese obliquity, makes avoiding confrontation an art of persuasion. The volume closes with Romain Laufer’s epistemological questioning of rhetoric in terms of international conflicts of legitimacy.

### Note:

1. International life is merely a superior species of social life.

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