

SPECIAL SECTION

Debating *Conflict, war and revolution*: Introduction to the special section

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We present this special section as a virtual platform for a lively intellectual debate on critical questions of war and peace in international politics and international political theory today. The initiative for curating this special section on *conflict, war and revolution* was a challenge set by one of Global Policy Journal's founding editors, Prof. Patrick Dunleavy, to reflect on the Journal's commitment to bring together policy-driven research on global risks and global collective (and, therefore, peaceful) action. In the context of intractable conflict and competition (rather than collaboration), would it be not time to rethink the focus on international organisations, institutions, global legitimacy and authority as rational responses to collectively shared global risks? A brief response to this challenge is that many of the premises for the Journal's ethos and remit remain as relevant today. Rather than solely building on contested normative commitments to liberal utopianism and shared value systems, the Journal continues to aspire to track competing concepts of global order and their correlative normative underpinnings, the diversity of political actors and institutions shaping a multipolar order, and crucially, the various types of asymmetric interdependencies between states, markets, societies and groups that translate into unequal and conflictual power relations ([Editorial statement](#)). A more detailed response to the question of conflict in a globalised world was to engage with Paul Kelly's 2022 volume *Conflict, War and Revolution: the problem of politics in international political thought*, in which Kelly studies and interprets the work of 10 thinkers – Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Clausewitz, Lenin and Mao and Carl Schmitt. We have, therefore, taken the opportunity to invite four

contributors to engage with some of the key themes of the book to bring in new and alternative perspectives that centre around the debates on redemptive politics versus the ubiquity of political violence. Each of the invited authors is concerned, in productively different and critical-constructive ways, with many of the questions raised in Paul Kelly's volume.

Pointing to the end of a brief period of hope for a settled international liberal order and cosmopolitan democracy that arose after the end of the Cold War, Kelly focuses on what came instead: democratic instability within nations, a lack of legitimacy and authority of international institutions and organisations and a lack of order in international relations. Global terrorism, the global financial crisis of 2007–08, and the rise of protectionist and nationalistic governments across the world are significant markers of this complex era. In attempting to make sense of these developments, Kelly has two distinct aims that come together in his selection of key, mainly Western thinkers. The first is to posit that history has no logic, no teleology and no particular meaning. While there may be good reasons for defending 'pacific, liberal and humane values', this has to be done through independent justification (Kelly, 2022, p.50). There are, however, no reasons to hold onto ideas of collective political and ideological 'progress' that make their way through history, whether these are narrated through liberal or Marxist histories. The periods of post-Cold War hope and the subsequent dashing of these hopes were, therefore, part of continuous fluctuations in international affairs and in international political thought. The second aim is to show that political thinking can indeed shed some light on these challenging times by examining a diversity of perspectives

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that are not primarily concerned with peace as means or an end for all societies and an end of politics. Instead, these perspectives are ‘free-standing paradigmatic views’ that serve as ‘exemplifications of different ways of thinking about and organising violence, force and conflict as contributions to an understanding of the various challenges of politics’ (Kelly, 2022, p.52).

The thinkers chosen by Kelly take specific positions in debates between ‘those who wish to challenge or qualify the hope of redemption and order in human affairs by overcoming politics, versus thinkers who address the ineradicable necessity and challenges of politics, war and conflict (Kelly, 2022, p.25). What Kelly is *not* setting up is a canon of realist thinkers who conform to a pre-existing tradition (Kelly, 2022, p.58). Rather, the chosen method of tracing ideas through historical dialectics attempts to bring back our attention to the ideas of those who in arguing against redemptive politics, foreground conflict and violence in politics. Violence in politics can be a fact of human nature, a necessary outcome of differences in values or resources, an evil necessity or a choice borne out of contingency. When and how are politics and violence intertwined are questions raised at different times and in different spaces. Importantly, going back to the idea of dialectical reasoning in political thinking, what are the key notions that are challenged? The texts set out in *Conflict, War and Revolution* question influential themes of their times: the absence of an overarching hegemon (see the chapter on Thucydides); utopianism and pacificism as a Christian legacy (see the chapter on Augustine); the stability of political societies and peoples (see the chapter on Machiavelli); the existence of an international political society (see the chapter on Hobbes); constitutionally limited sovereignty and the right to revolution (see the chapter on Locke); commercial society and cosmopolitan engagement (see the chapter on Rousseau); Enlightenment rationalism (see the chapter on Clausewitz); strategies for overcoming the state (see the chapter on Lenin and Mao); liberal optimism and globalisation (see the chapter on Schmitt).

Kelly asserts that these themes that are associated with concepts such as progress, development and liberal utopianism resonate with many of the dominant ideas and political experiences of the late 20th and early 21st century. There are two caveats to this. The prevalence and assumed universalism of these specific ideas were confined to a tiny period of human history and contained within the contemporary Western world, used here reductively to denote the amalgam of the Western allied states of World War II and industrialised nations of the 20th century rather than its more complex and fluid civilisational definition. More has to be said about these debates from perspectives outside of Western states and from the perspective of non-dominant actors and agents. Second, ideas and practices are not inevitably intertwined. The current climate, Kelly argues, requires bringing in views that challenge the dominance of ideas

of redemptive politics. In line with dialectical reasoning, the current climate should *also* call for thinking that does not naturalise or legitimise violence. To be clear, Kelly does not claim that the texts and thinkers covered in this book are comprehensive accounts of existing paradigms in political thinking on violence. Whereas the thinkers chosen by Kelly stand for specific conceptual frameworks, the book itself is a call for further explorations and debates. Thus, the special section's contributors have accepted the invitation to further the debate.

Hauke Brunkhorst's response article, *War in World Society: Towards a new order of global constitutionalism?* (Brunkhorst, 2023) is framed around the evolution of ‘world society’ as an outcome of historically contingent but path-defining combinations of republican revolutions, experiments with constitutionalism and continuing projects of democracy building. A globalised society – connected through ideas, institutions, legal orders and markets – does not have many desirable alternatives in the absence of functional nation-states that can fulfil popular demands for legitimacy and performance. Hence, while Brunkhorst agrees with Kelly that violence has been a constant feature of political life throughout recorded history, he takes issue with the underlying premise of violence being an anthropological constant that is fixed, and therefore, the main determinant of the pathways of social evolution. The argument made here is that transnational constitutionalism as an ordering factor of world society is not illusory in that it is anthropologically, socially and politically possible. While the ongoing war in Ukraine and elsewhere could spell the end of a particular evolutionary path of world law and world society, this is – as history does not have a logic – not a given. Hope and the fact of the open-endedness of political projects such as democracy and a full-fledged world law remain determining factors of politics, as much as violence is. The attempts to regulate conflict and wars are not idealistic abstractions but are discernible in history in the shape of institutional and constitutional arrangements.

The link between social revolutions and the interdependence of states is a theme that also runs through Garion Frankel and Cary Nederman's article entitled *Give peace a chance ... for what? Paine, Kant and democratic peace* (Frankel & Nederman, 2023). Frankel and Nederman make a case for bringing back the democratic peace hypothesis to first demonstrate where normative political thinking and political science coincide, and second, to go beyond standard invocations of Kant's thesis of Perpetual Peace. Instead, they offer an overview of a neglected thinker of democratic peace, namely Thomas Paine (1737–1809), whose concerns with democratic peace were as pragmatic as they were normative. Unlike Kant, Paine drew a clear connection between international conflict and domestic injustice. Social reforms and social revolutions – the material and moral improvement of society at large – could only happen in times of peace. In turn, peace

was attained through a certain cost–benefit calculation of commerce. This is to say that Paine believed that wars between trading countries came at too high a cost for commercial societies. This debate engages us with the questions of why peace is important, how it is best achieved, and whether it is peace or war that is a more rational means to ends such as the national interest, social development, and the elimination of tyranny, or what is called authoritarianism today.

By drawing on Kelly's chapter on Lenin and Mao, Desirée Poets explores in her contribution *Pacification as a key problem of politics in international political thought* (Poets, 2023) violence from a colonial and post-colonial perspective with an emphasis on settler colonies. In her Marxist-driven analysis, Poets aims at bringing 'anti-colonial, decolonial, and anti-capitalist thought [in conversation] without collapsing them'. She argues that settler communities generate a specific form of violence, namely violence as pacification that is caused by an 'unfinished war of conquest'. Thus, with violence through pacification Poets identifies a widely overlooked and understudied paradigm of conflict and violence that is typical for colonies founded through conquest by building on the principles of destruction and replacement. Through her analysis, Poets also sheds light on the ongoing circle of violence through the settlers' claimed sovereign right to kill and the Indigenous and Black moral right to resist, relating to some underlying notions of liberalism that, instead of generating peace, reveals 'liberalism as pacification' and its potentials for a 'violence that is "concealed, monopolized, and structured into the fabric of modern liberal democracy"'. With her contribution, Poets argues for the significance of pacification and settler colonialism in international political theory and their relevance for a decolonised or at least less Eurocentric International Relations (Theory).

Xi Lin's contribution *Technology as a Paradigm to Investigate War* (Lin, 2023) draws the reader's attention to the (changing) means of violence through technological inventions and innovations. In his Heideggerian reading of violence as *technē*, Lin argues that the multiple references to warfare technology that are scattered throughout Kelly's book justify as being treated as a topic on its own. Lin also argues that technology in warfare follows similar (though not necessarily identical) paradigmatic changes to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. In his response, Lin identifies five paradigms, four of them discuss technologies that have been touched upon by Kelly in passing, while the fifth paradigm, 'digitalisation and smart technologies', have been developed after the youngest theorists', discussed by Kelly, Mao's (1976) and Schmitt's (1988) death. Through the introduction of these five paradigms, Lin offers a more in-depth analysis of technology's significance in warfare than Kelly's pragmatic distinction between a pre-state and a (post) state era. By emphasising technology, Lin accentuates a topic that is, at least in (international) political theory

circles, understudied and deserves further recognition, particularly given more recent innovations' power to shift conventional warfare as well as power dynamics within conventional and unconventional wars. Thus, Lin underscores technology's potential as a 'driving factor behind the shifting balance of inter-state relations'.

We believe that the articles contained in this special section productively carry on the work of dialectical reasoning on both timely and perennial questions of conflict and peace, disorder and reordering, on means and methods of warfare and pacification, and on the multiplicity of political agents and modes of power that influence and shape the choices of the diverse and overlapping communities of fate that we are all part of today.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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