

Communication

“Verum Ipsum Factum”, Factum Ipsum Bellum: Death Drive or Driving towards Death?

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Abstract: Is war evitable? Besides being a question to which humanity is struggling to answer, it is the title of the letter exchange between Freud and Einstein that inspired this editorial. The aim is to address this question and analyse whether there is a pattern behind some historical events and mass behaviour, starting with Freud and ending with the possibility of applying chaos theory. What has been hypothesized for centuries is that the masses behave in a manner that can overcome the individual's interest but are subject to the same risks and patterns as the individual is, i.e., hypernarcissism that fuels the vicious circle of victims and executioners. Is there a reason why historical memory does not stop humankind from pursuing war? Is there an intrinsic death drive that fuels man against one another, or are there other, more complex reasons why war could be (or could not be) inevitable?

Keywords: war; mass psychology; mass psychopathology; psychodynamics; chaos theory



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1. Introduction

“Is there a way of freeing humankind from the threat of war? Can human aggression be channelled to help protect people against the impulses of hatred and destruction?” asked Freud to Einstein [1] with respect to humankind's worst invention. Almost 100 years later, we still strive to find an answer to these questions. This article aims to provide further points of reflection as far as such a complex socio-political phenomenon, such as war, is regarded.

Freud's theories explicated in “Beyond the pleasure principle” state that “destrudo”, i.e., the death drive to destruction, explicated through aggressiveness, repetition compulsion and self-destructiveness, stands opposed to “libido”, i.e., the tendency toward survival, propagation, sex, and other creative, life-producing drives [2]. This theory still needs an in-depth analysis when it comes to what is the trigger for destrudo, considering that Freud mainly studied patients who suffered traumas and tended to re-enact the traumatic experience, but not study the people who created the conditions for traumas to be experienced by others. What happens to those who are the source of the trauma?

According to the father of psychoanalysis, “the countless cruelties in history and in our everyday life vouch a death instinct”. In a letter on 30 July 1932, Einstein asked Freud if war was evitable [1]. However, Freud himself was far from convinced that destrudo was a theory. He rather considered it as speculation [2]. Is it, therefore, possible to know whether war is evitable and what are the deep psychodynamic mechanisms that propel masses to drive towards war and death? Or does a death drive exist within us as an underivable force?

2. Mass Psychology and Psychodynamics

Some psychological theories tried to explain whether these mechanisms exist and how they work. Among these, the “Multi Trends theory of aggression” classified different

types of aggressive/destructive behaviours, some of which are driven by the pleasure principle, and others, such as “hostile aggression”, whose motif lies in a psychic pain that gives the aggression the affective quality that transforms annoyance into anger [3]. Notwithstanding this, if psychodynamics, partially and in many ways, has helped to explain how masses behave during conflicts, there are no clear elements able to throw light on the genesis of wars between collectivities and countries. Therefore, what is the hidden hostility-generating experience responsible for historical conflicts created and driven by large groups of humans?

The first point of view concerns classical mass psychology. Recalling Freud’s “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”, permanent and enduring masses are held by a libidinal bond, and a strong unconscious identification occurs between the individual and the group [4]. According to Le Bon, in some circumstances, mass morality can overcome the one of the individuals, and only the masses can manifest great disinterest or great dedication [5]. Freud speculates that it is necessary to distinguish between mass types: groups that reunite for a short time, formed by heterogeneous individuals and sharing a transient goal, as opposed to revolutionary masses, which share deep common interests. Based on these assumptions, “emotional contagion” is much more intense in the second one [6]. This aspect’s importance has been highlighted in a recent work by Volkan, which defined the concept of “large-group identity” and describes how protecting it plays a crucial role in maintaining and even initiating war-like situations or wars [7].

What needs to be highlighted is the role of narcissism as a potent generator of conflict, both in individuals and in the masses [3]. The motif that lies behind a group’s belief to be “better than another one” can be driven both by an antisocial—i.e., disregarding rules to injure others—and malignant—i.e., Hitler or Stalin’s—hypernarcissism. The question is—what triggers the vicious circles that lie behind the perpetration of violence and war carried out by masses of such types? The pitiless narcissistic injury of one group intensely humiliating another—as happened in colonialism, slavery, and genocide—creates a cyclicality that fuels war, and, most importantly, the narcissistic injury creates an hypernarcissistic skew in the injured group, triggering it to seek revenge and recognition for being the “good ones”, hurt by the “bad ones”.

Is this the reason why, generally, a victory cannot settle a matter for good? Volkan has hypothesised that a past group injury becomes a “chosen trauma”, meaning it plays a crucial role in defining the identity of the group, therefore becoming able to motivate every energy of it, like a banner [8]. However, such a mobilisation of the psychic energy of the mass can foster a hypernarcissistic skew all over again, revitalising the same psychic energy that moved the “bad ones” to humiliate them at the beginning, an example being the Third Reich’s ambitions in WWII. For this reason, Kleinian analysts underlined the role of reverting to paranoid-schizoid thinking in the face of humiliation rather than facing depression and the work of mourning [9].

3. Psychodynamics and Chaos Theory

In this light, can we hypothesise a further application of chaos theory in the perpetration of conflict? Though one may argue history is not a mathematical complex, within the apparent randomness of complex, chaotic systems, such as mass conflicts and wars, there could be underlying patterns, interconnectedness, constant feedback loops, repetition, self-similarity, fractals, and self-organisation [10,11]. Otherwise, maybe these hidden pictures are not concealed behind history, but behind psychodynamics and—possibly—psychopathology themselves, and history only becomes the final stage on which many mathematical systems intertwine with each other along the timeline of the world. This explanation could be a common field in which both Freud and Adler’s theories are finalized, in the sense that both the individual and the mass share common ideals: “The young men who murdered the Austrian heir to the throne were individuals at odds with themselves. The crowds which subsequently clamoured for war as a solution, and the still larger crowds which accepted war as a solution, consisted similarly of individuals at odds with themselves” [12].

Without neglecting the role that some dictators and sovereign systems may have in influencing the citizens of their state with aspects of emotional contagion, up to the point of being able to justify wars—through a questionable reality check—the genesis of wars may not only be linked to the psychodynamics of masses in the context of libido/destrudo related drives, but it may also hide behind circumstances triggered by “butterfly-effect” events and collective disturbance phenomena. In this scenario, the force driven by asymmetric political and military power structures lies, as well, in being a possible trigger of such an effect rather than a collective disturbance phenomenon. Another hypothesis is that asymmetric political and military power in between states might unveil or worsen collective disturbance phenomenon. In this sense, the predominance of multifactorial (i.e., psychodynamic, social, socio-sanitary, cultural, religious, mediatic, political, or military) elements of disorder over elements of order can be associated with the genesis of war.

Considering what has been previously stated regarding masses, and that, most of the time, history-changing events were perpetrated by masses, could it be that chaos theory may apply to psychic energy in a way, considering the psyche a very complex mathematical model? In addition, Vico’s work considered that “this civilized world has been certainly made by men, whenever we can, and because we have to, find the principles behind the modifications happening in our own human mind” [13]. From this point of view, history becomes a concrete science of things, of events created by humankind, and, at the same time, the witness of the human mind that made those same things, following the “Verum Ipsum factum” principle.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, when it comes to war genesis and perpetration, can some butterfly effect explicate itself through deep psychodynamic mechanisms that may—or may not—lead to a mass conflict? Many intricate mechanisms play a role in the background, but history is suggesting so. “Our shadows will walk through Vienna, wander the court, and frighten the lords” [14]: these words, by the renowned Gavrilo Princip (one personality among the many butterfly flutters in history), stand impressed on the walls of Terezin prison. These shadows are still walking in our minds, triggering questions that not even Freud and Einstein could answer—why war?

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