



War or Dance? Blind Spots and the Locus of our Fears

Carlos Alvarez-Pereira

Vice President of The Club of Rome;
Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract

War is the ultimate expression of polarization. It instantly invokes in all of us the binary divide of life and death. Being supportive of the victims of aggression is a humane mandate. At the same time, the active engagement in the binary logic of war prevents us from recognizing the systemic and violent nature of modern international relations. If we intend to end violent conflicts among humans, a deeper perspective is required. Hopefully, this could contribute to paving the way for a truly Pluriversal World to emerge before it is too late.

1. In and Out, Us and Them

“Nothing human is alien to me,” so said Terence, a playwright born in Africa and brought as a slave to Rome, more than two millennia ago. The statement is so deep that it gives room for multiple interpretations. For one, it points to the fundamental relatedness of all humans. This has more than once fed the idea of universality, that we all share the same fundamental values. But “*the universal is always the universal of somebody*,” as Barbara Cassin puts it. Universality has been too often the banner of the powerful to crush other people. In my view, Terence’s words bring a deeper sense of reflection: any of us is capable of connecting with all human feelings and actions, even the most different from ours, and the most terrible. It is easy enough to connect with the many forms of beauty that humans are able to produce, as well as with the pains of all victims. But we can also connect with what makes humans commit atrocities, like waging devastating wars against other humans, and against nature. It might be unpleasant to face it but we have to recognize that both the evil and the divine are in all of us.

When ignoring that fundamental ambivalence, we continue practicing the fantasy of exclusion. The first principle of social organization is still to establish who is “Us” and “Them”. There is an “In” of the circle of people we treat by default with respect, trust and generosity. That circle builds on and expands the foundational experience of a mother caring for her children, but for now, we continue drawing a line and leaving most of humanity “Out”. For sure others are not us, but there are critical differences between distinction (“you are not me”), separation (“you don’t belong to my circle”) and exclusion (“I don’t have to care about you”), and we override those differences all the time. People who are “Out” do not have by far the same rights as people “In”. Heritage is still based on kinship, and we indulge ourselves with the concept of the individual as a microcosm, while

when we are alone we are nothing. Not only do we create artificial boundaries, still dealing in the 21st century with the nationalism that originated in the 17th century, we also take for granted a moral superiority of “Us” over “Them”. On those boundaries, we practice zero-sum games, avoiding recognition of and responsibility for the many forms of injustice and exploitation we impose on “Them”.

“War is an extreme case of denial of the possibility to learn new patterns.”

When Ursula von der Leyen says “*Ukraine is one of us*”, she is also saying “and *Russia is not*”. It is easy to connect with the sense of solidarity leading her to say so, and the solidarity with the victims is of course right, but the exclusion is not. Unless we address the fact that Russia is also one of us, as everyone else is on the planet, human or not, we will not start climbing the steep ladder to overcome not only this terrible war but also the structural elements leading to violence. With the images of destruction in Ukraine flooding our screens everyday, this may sound naive, utopian and even cynical. But this perspective is not pantheist nor illusory, it is just systemic. Russia and in particular Vladimir Putin are certainly to blame for this war but if we only do that, we miss its cybernetic nature: this tragic episode is one more in the vicious circle of geopolitics, whose logic is equally fed by all actors looking for hegemony. These may appear as enemies but they all contribute to keeping the logic alive. Nothing better for an empire than another one to fight, in a mutually reinforcing confrontation forcing everyone to choose between “Us” and “Them”.

2. Denial of Complexity

The fantasy of exclusion is linked to another blind spot. In our obsession to have reality under control we split it into pieces, we ignore interdependencies and we look for reductionistic explanations and binary qualifications like “right” and “wrong”, “good” and “evil”. Complexity is seen as an issue while it is the essence of Life: what makes living systems unpredictable is the same that makes them alive. And that is the capacity to learn, in the deep sense of the term, i.e. to reconfigure the system in completely new patterns. War is an extreme case of denial of the possibility to learn new patterns. It evacuates tensions through the destruction of the complexity we do not like to deal with. But this happens not only on the side of the aggressor. Putin frames the attack on Ukraine as an act of defense of the interests of Russia and the Russophone Ukrainians. This is a tragic simplification, but not less is the framing of the Western response. We have no option left but to be with or against Putin and Russia. The whole country is now excluded in all sorts of manner, and anyone having relationships with Russia has become suspicious of complacency with evil.

We live in terrible times. That binary reaction is perfectly aligned with the arguments of Putin: it actually confirms that the West never had and will never have the intention to integrate Russia as “one of us”. As shown in Hollywood movies in the last few decades, the Russians are always the villains. Should not we pay serious attention to the fact that most Russians perceived what happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a terrible humiliation? By claiming that Russia should be punished for being evil, we just continue feeding the logic of war. And it could be wise to remember now what happened with Germany after World

War I. A similar sense of humiliation contributed to the unfolding of an absolute tragedy of unprecedented scale. As said by Aurelio Peccei long ago, we suffer from a “human gap”, the difference between our capacity to act and the capacity to understand and deal with the consequences of our actions. We know more about how Life works than we use everyday in the framing of what is correct or incorrect. It is more than time that we learnt what we already know, for the sake of desirable futures.

“Instead of suspending intellectual property due to the exceptional circumstances and the role of the state in funding the research of vaccines, we have allowed a worldwide tragedy to be addressed in a totally unfair way: no vaccines for the poor countries and billions of financial wealth for the happy few.”

3. The Violent Nature of International Relations

One essential aspect to overcome the logic of war is to realize that international relations continue to be, in the 21st century, dominated by the brutal exercise of power under the “Us and Them” framings. We dream that it is not the case, that a multilateral framework of global governance ensures most of the time that conflicts of interest are solved in a peaceful way. Unfortunately, this is an illusion, at the very least for Most of the World, 6 out of 7 parts of humanity living in so-called “developing” countries. The dominant framing says that violence is associated with “under-development” and that once a society becomes “developed” in the Western sense of the term, it leaves violence behind. And then, the solution is obvious: apply the Western recipes to your own country and you will become peaceful and prosperous. For privileged people like myself, having lived all my life in a quite appeased Europe, this sounds fantastic. But as Gandhi warned us, the issue with Western civilization is that “*it would be a good idea*”. It is still that, an idea. My guess is that you can only assess the moral value of a political and economic system by asking the excluded how they feel they are treated. The incumbents’ profit from the system, it is all too human for them to see only its advantages. What do “Them”, those who are “Out”, think?

I am afraid that those excluded from power think the global system we have is brutal and totally unfair. It is based on the use of force of different kinds, including military power, and it is not at all democratic since power is concentrated in the hands of countries representing a small and declining minority of the global population. The terribly sad history of the Cold War is just part of a long list of brutal and mutually reinforcing interventions by the USA and the USSR to prevent any other country from following a path different from being with “Us” or “Them”. The list of cases is too long to state here. With the collapse of the Soviet Union came the hope of “*the end of History*” à la Fukuyama. This proved to be completely misleading.

Powers, and especially the winners of the Cold War, continued to behave basically in the same way, including the practice of illegal and devastating military interventions whenever it suited their interests. Among many others, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is recent enough to

undermine any kind of moral superiority when contesting the invasion of Ukraine. And Most of the World is well aware. Not to talk about the moral hypocrisy of (rightly) doing a lot to help Ukrainian refugees, while rejecting all others from different origins and skin colours and paying other countries to deal with them. The terrible fantasy of exclusion is all around as if we could ignore the consequences of the tragedies that we created by building an unfair world while pretending otherwise.

4. Democracy as Unfair Competition?

These days we are being told that the war in Ukraine is a fight between democracy and autocracy. And that Putin should not win because that could be a fatal blow to fragile Western democracies. Again, we see here the “Us and Them” framing in action. In this case by blaming others for the degradation of our own political systems. Blaming Russia for producing “fake news” and interfering in national elections, and blaming our compatriots, stupid enough to vote for Le Pen or Trump, are just other ways of ignoring our blind spots. For around 40 years, the political and economic systems of Western countries have been shifted towards a systematic production of social inequality. Well-being has been at best stagnating for most of the population, only to be lured by debt-driven consumerism, while huge amounts of financial wealth have been created ex-nihilo in the hands of a very small elite. The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest example of the same. Instead of suspending intellectual property due to the exceptional circumstances and the role of the state in funding the research of vaccines, we have allowed a worldwide tragedy to be addressed in a totally unfair way: no vaccines for the poor countries and billions of financial wealth for the happy few.

At the same time, globalization processes have made sure that national politics is less and less capable of creating possibilities for most people. We have been consistently ignoring the fractures created by this dynamic at work for decades, and now we realize at last that our democracies are fragile. Absolutely yes, but do not blame Putin for that. As Shakespeare said, “*the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves*”. If democracy is about real equality of rights and opportunities for all, it is simply absurd to expect that an economic system based on rewarding more and more of the already privileged could in any way contribute to it. The central tenet of democracy is inclusive collaboration in respect of the dignity and the value of every human being. Could we really expect unfair competition to be the instrument for that?

5. War or Dance?

We easily fall into the blind spots described above because they are deeply rooted in our many fears, the fear of pain and hardship, the fear of loneliness and irrelevance and of course the ultimate one, the fear “*to rule them all and in the darkness bind them*”, that of our sure death. We feel that we are increasing the contradictions between our human drive and the future of life as a whole, on a planet whose biophysical limits have been reached, whose climatic stability is endangered by human activity, and whose living and mineral resources are being exhausted at a great pace, all of that without eliminating human hardship. And afraid as we are of this permanent conflict with the world, we invent self-delusions to alleviate our fears. The fantasy of exclusion, the denial of complexity, and the hypocrisy of the stories we invent to make sense of the world are ways we use to protect ourselves, not so

much from need but from the anxieties we face everyday in our eternal quest for meaning. Are they the right response to our fears?

Keeping alive the logic of war, either military, economic or cultural, will not improve our situation, it will make it worse. As realised by Donella Meadows at the end of her life, dancing is a much better metaphor when dealing with complexity. It also mobilizes energies but in a more positive way, by creating new patterns and levels of learning which go even beyond conscious reasoning. The cultural transformation we need is made of this kind of shift in metaphors, from war to dance.

How do we open the space of possibilities for humanity to build desirable futures? This is the critical question we have to ask. And it is hard to address it within the paradigms that have been prevalent in the global scene (see Table below). It is quite clear now that the “One World” idea was a misleading fantasy. But it does not make the “Multipolar World” in which we live the appropriate response to the existential challenges of humanity. In my view, it is more than time to consider a completely different paradigm, the “Pluriversal World”, built on trust and curiosity rather than fear and greed. The seeds of this world already exist, they play a silent melody that we do not hear, busy as we are in making a lot of noise to ignore our fears. I hope the time has come to open the space of possibilities in that direction, for the sake of ourselves and of generations to come.

Table 1: Elements of Different World Paradigms

One World	Multipolar World	Pluriversal World
One recipe fits all	Few centers of power	Diversity of Pathways
IMF, WB, experts, standards	Competing institutions and standards	Learning together, liberation from helplessness
“End of History”	“Us and Them”	“The Web of Life”
Policies & technologies for control Top down & scaling up		Decentralized pathways to wellbeing in the biosphere
Separation, competition, scarcity		Relationships, infinite richness of Life
Financial capital	Military power	Vitality, heritage, creativity
Greed	Fear	Trust, curiosity
“People are problematic”		“Trust the humanity of everybody” “Allow Life to be alive”
“For things to remain the same, everything has to change” (Lampedusa)		“Nothing has changed, but everything has changed” (Tamkeen)

Author Contact information
 Email: calvarezinx@gmail.com