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## Economic causes of wars. An historical essay

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# **The historic intriguing union between war, economy, power and religions comes back**

**Jacques Fontanel**

**The Evolution of the Global Arms Industry  
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## **Résumé :**

Il existe des liens étroits entre la guerre, l'économie, le pouvoir et les religions. Le pouvoir et les religions sont souvent des causes de guerre, tout comme l'économie. Les analyses des économistes sur cette question sont de moins en moins nombreuses, comme si les guerres n'étaient qu'un phénomène aléatoire, quasiment impossible à prendre en compte. Pourtant, les conceptions religieuses de l'économie, de la guerre et de la paix n'offrent pas toujours à cette dernière une quelconque priorité d'objectif.

## **Summary.**

There are strong links between war, economy, power and religion. Power and religion are often causes of war, just like the economy. The economists' analyzes of this question are becoming less and less numerous, as if wars were only a random phenomenon, almost impossible to take into account. Yet religious conceptions of economics, war, and peace do not give any priority at this purpose.

**Word :** Religion, Economy, power, war, armament, disarmament.

Is war consubstantial with the human nature, registered in his genes, culture or reason? For the economic mainstream, the reply seems to be positive. Even today, the economic analyzes ignore war, conflict, deterrence, armed threats, because it is not really an economic problem in the short run. They forget to think about two undeclared assumptions. First, peace is a normal state of affairs. Second, economic development is the fundamental means for sustainable peace. However, these assumptions are not proved anymore. For Heraclites, "war is the father of anything". In primitive societies, the predation system existed and there was a need to protect crops and hunting grounds. Then, the economic system was still working on predation and slavery, which was even admitted by all the religions. During the Middle Age, with serfdom, wars were used to ensure

comparative power and wealth of lords, but they also had religious causes. With the Renaissance and Mercantilism, war and economy were closely linked; they worked together to ensure the princes' power, their population often being violently reduced to the minimum subsistence. For Machiavelli, laws and arms are the main States' foundations.

For classical and neoclassical thought, economic wars were condemned; slavery and colonialism according to Smith were not justified on this basis (Coulomb, 2004). Only antagonist systems, religious or civilization expeditions seemed justified wars. For the Marxist analysis, wars have primarily economic causes; it is the result of the class struggle. At the end of the nineteenth century, economic globalization was highly developed, but this world of colonization asked some questions related to power and raw materials. Then, the two world wars were the results of the States power fights, with first antagonist views on the division of the world and then the will to create another civilization through the destruction of enemies, such as foreign states, races and religions. With the advent of nuclear weapons, economic arms were used with reduced efficiency, during the USSR and USA arms race (Fontanel, 1983).

In 1990, wars were intellectually condemned with the end of the Soviet Union – the market economy was supposedly leading to peace. Today, the very unequal globalization conduces our modern society to a forgotten form of war since the Middle Age and the Renaissance, i.e. religious war, which has its roots in the ruthless cyclical and violent economic system and in a shameless personal profit as ultimate goal for human beings perspective. Materialism dream of peace and opulence is a failure, with the development of precariousness and poverty. It produces a return to philosophical or religious values that lead to new conflicts with potentially destructive consequences for democratic values, tolerance and freedom of thought.

## **I. Power ambitions, religion, and predation as factors of wars**

In primitive economic systems, war and economy were closely associated. Undoubtedly, slavery is one of the oldest institutions of humanity. From the beginning of time, war was conceived as a natural mode of acquisition of wealth. Predation was a convenient way to get rich, the winner could then reduce the vanquished to slavery for free labour. War was basically a particular economic act of predation and investment in the appropriation of the slave labour. For the ideal city of Plato, chiefs and warriors had to keep their moral virtues and therefore they did not have any contact with the business of money and trade that corrupt them. It established the equality of fortune between citizens, because inequality is a perpetual source of revolution. The market must be framed by the State. For Aristotle, slavery is justified by a natural inferiority of some kind of men. Private property is synonymous with social peace, but the goal of life should not be the accumulation of wealth (chrematistic). For the

Greek civilization, city economy seemed a subset of the city organization. Economic values are based mainly on selfishness and amorality. Warriors had a higher status than all economic workers and producers and then slavery was justified. There were three manners to develop slavery, war with its spoil of prisoners, piracy and trade.

Holly Paul preached the obedience of the slaves with their Masters and their States, considering that for the Lord Kingdom all men are baptized to form one body. Since the condemnation of slavery of the Pope Leon III, 1888, that theology of slavery was the official doctrine of the Church, except for the special slavery abolition of American Indians at the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During Middle Age, the Church tolerated slavery. Saint Thomas d'Aquin affirmed that war is right if its cause is right, notably in order to obtain a good peace for the development of Christian faith with the continuation of the Community property and the application of the "fair price". It is useful sometimes to make war in order to obtain a Christian peace. Economic goals are not evoked as a reason for war despite its usefulness for slavery and the serfdom institutions. In a relative scarcity situation, war and social dominations of the chiefs and warriors are decisive economic investment for predation, but religions, philosophers and states authorities neither privileged this argument.

## **II. Economic development and wars, for the unique service of the Prince**

Mercantilism was born with the new rise of power of States Nations. It was not a homogeneous current of thought or a unified theory. The mercantilist ideas mark the end of the objective to find an economic system compatible with de Christian doctrine of piety, charity and justice. For Jean Bodin, there is nobody who gains that another does not lose. With the beginning of the "economic nationalism", whereas the stock of wealth is analyzed as relatively fixed, if a State wanted to increase its wealth, he had to do it at the detriment of another. Three values are developed, first the necessity to conquer foreign markets, second the healthy profit objective of tradesman and lastly the accumulation of wealth between the hands of the Prince (Fontanel, Ward 1993).

A cosmopolitan economy has no sense, because the State's power is the main issue, and not the consumer's welfare. For Henry VII, England must export manufactured goods and import gross product, a sentence that was the basis of the new English prosperity. Oliver Cromwell established the Navigation laws, in order to ensure the pre-eminence of England on the international trade, as a complementary effect of four wars against Dutch rival. State has the responsibility of the development of national wealth. Protectionism, export aid, industrialization subsidies or projects or armed conflicts were used in order to reinforce the power of the Prince, notably by the processes of imperialism and colonialism. Human welfare is not the objective of

the States, because it creates laziness that is not pertinent for the power of the Prince. Colbert employed six years old children in the State manufactures, he reduced interiors customs duties and he built important infrastructures. For the bullionist analyzes, the wealth and power of States were measured by its own quantity of gold. The interest of gold is partly explained by the importance of the raw materials and the mercenary costs in time of war.

The state was first established itself as a power organization dedicated to enhancing the prosperity of the national economy. The foreign policy of each state is to knock down all the enemy forces, by all means of cunning and violence, through colonization, enslavement or the use of weapons. The policy decision is based not only on the enrichment capacity of the country, but also his potential to weaken the enemy. If the dollar relapsing crisis remains the international currency, it should, at least partially, to the military strength of the United States, whose national security objectives today are inseparable from those concerning economic and financial security.

### **III. The end of war with the world generalization of capitalism**

Adam Smith condemned mercantilism and qualified it as an economy with the service of the Prince. If Adam Smith condemns at the same moment the slavery and the colonialism, it is mainly on the basis of an economic thought. So, he called of his wishes the strictest application of the individual interest, fundamental factor of realization of the "invisible hand", that is the main shield against armed conflicts. War and preparation for war are political phenomena initiated by the monopoly spirit. However, for Smith, the art of war is the noblest of arts, and he approves tariffs that would keep defence-related industries strong. Defence is more important than opulence. Ricardo calls for a negotiated disarmament, since he considers that the uninterrupted growth of military expenditure should inevitably lead to war. Nevertheless, armed forces must be established to ensure the States' sovereignty, threatened by less developed economies and the covetousness of their neighbours. For the classical British economists, generalized development thanks to industrialization and the diffusion of the market system precedes the possibility of a general peace.

Marginalism and neoclassical thoughts are not very concerned by war, even if for Walras, the universal search for peace underlies its entire scientific project. The economic theory has to lead to the refusal of the wars, what constitutes an objective within the reach of the generations to come, thanks to the free trade. Permanence of War is explained by political wills, religious objectives or civilization of primitive people. Evangelization is analyzed as a duty of Christian countries and the domination economic effect is not really analyzed. Victor Hugo or Proudhon were favourable to the colonization process.

Francis Fukuyama (1993) has echoed the Kantian idea according to which humanity progresses inexorably towards the pacification of international

relations with the concept of the end of history after the failure of USSR. War would become less likely. It is a victory for capitalism. For the upholders of the theory of the globalization, the increasing economic interdependences tend to reduce the intervention of public authorities in the economy. The political influence must be reduced gradually in front of the economic imperatives. Economic knowledge of a generalized world market system is the solution for eternal peace. Laissez faire underwent irreversible national structural alterations. Mercantilism, nationalism and communist ideas disappear with the enlargement of capitalism that refuse threat of war and war itself. Capitalism produces peace when it is generalized in the world. Wars appear when other systems, more primitive, maintain these false institutions against the economic development initiated by the market system. Today, the democratic peace theory considers multilateral organizations and a contagion effect as essential to contain and win non-capitalist systems. U.S. military power encourages the spread of democratic model and the stability of existing democracies (Gleditsch, Ward, 2006). This theory does not follow the anti-militarist tradition of liberal orthodoxy. The solution to the conflict is presumed to be the emergence of a complete neo-liberal globalization.

#### **IV. Scarcity and antagonist economic systems, factors of wars**

For Thomas Malthus, a defender of the market economy and private property, progress is not desirable at all costs and free trade is not the panacea for world peace. He considers that wars find their origin and support in economic hardship, poverty or pauperism. Convinced that the economic growth will disappear with the limitation of food resources, he forecasted a stationary state, where all people should live with the minimum vital. With the gradual depletion of soils, overcrowding and the emergence of a steady state, the war remains a plausible hypothesis. His pessimism contrasted with the optimistic forecasts of Jean-Baptiste Say, on the unlimited economic growth potential of capitalism.

For Marx and Engels, peace and market have no intrinsic moral virtue. War and conflicts relate to the superstructure and are conditioned by antagonistic social relations. The defence of the formal liberties is a doctrine that reinforces the domination of the “bourgeoisie” and of the owners of capital. The market economy produces contradictory effects. Due to the increased importance of the primitive capital accumulation, the profit research leads to the law of a general trend for the reduction and equalization of the profit. It results from it a relative and absolute pauperization and impoverishment, which leads most proletarians towards a minimum vital, in respect with the “bronze law”, so inciting them to commit a revolution against the capitalists. Social war is inherent to capitalism. Revolutions and wars are often necessary steps in this

process of social change. Only the successful revolutionary class struggle leads to peace. The systemic nature of war is inherent in the capitalist mode of production. War is necessary for the economic development of capitalism, with the colonization necessary for ownership at cheap raw materials and energy. Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, is necessarily characterized by total war and capitalist exploitation of the world. Rosa Luxemburg considered military investment to be very useful for the development of capitalist economies, in the first instance as a catalyst of primitive accumulation; then as an instrument of colonial domination; and lastly as a hegemonic factor of the struggle between the capitalist countries to divide up the world. Without a possible agreement between the major capitalist interests, an inter-imperialist war must be the main cause of the end of the capitalist system. War is a result of the capitalism contradictions.

The colonized countries have had mixed fortunes on their development. Before independence, the 13 States of England had a satisfactory level of development. However Americans refused the economic and political excessive claims from the Kingdom. The conflict was solved by war, to achieve independence. Then, economic development of the United States was able to be committed. In counterpoint, trade developed by the Companies of the East or West Indies had allowed the basis for a strong economic development in some Indian regions and ports. However, the successful desire of England to colonize the continent led to several wars. In accordance with the principle put forward by Henry VII, an unequal trade between the colony and England were organized, at the expense of indigenous productions. Then, India suffered an economic crisis that is a main cause of the impoverishment of a continent. In this context of exploitation of natural resources of India and limiting all economic activities in competition with the metropolis, the country was condemned to underdevelopment. The colonialist system enriched London or Paris at the expense of the colonized peoples.

Keynes wanted to eradicate both war and communism. Safety is also a matter for the national economy because the economic crisis sometimes led to the overthrow of democracies and political power application. The needs of people are fulfilled as a consequence of the generalization of the market economy, but the final solutions consist on the suitable adaptation of the States and Nation as a whole. Sustainable peace, condition for economic and social development, is inconceivable without international economic solidarity of democracies facing communism (Coulomb, Dunne, 2008).

Other analyses went to the same direction, notably those of Galbraith. Today, the economic importance of the military sector in capitalist economies seems indisputable; it would be only compared to the role played by the military research and development in the development of the ultramodern technologies. The intrinsic pacifism of market economies and democracies is also questionable, as recently evidenced by the popularity of the Gulf War or of the

war in Afghanistan in the Western public opinion. Because of the permanence of militarism, the power of the military sector that serves only particular interests and the State apparatus misuse, no model of capitalism can be considered as definitely peaceful. Kenneth Galbraith explained that the military importance in the strategy of the United States governments dates back to the origins of the American state set up by merchants, who applied a mercantilist policy on foreign markets (following the rules defined by Hamilton), despite their commitment to the liberal philosophy of Jefferson. The presentation of the military industrial complex by President Eisenhower in 1961, has highlighted the threat to democracy strengthening the power of the US military establishment (government, Congress, armament firms, lobbyists) in the "temple" of capitalism. The couple Militarism and war is a strong symbol of a dysfunction of American democracy (Galbraith, 1993). The development of the military sector was also used to maintain their economic and political power on the domestic scene. The famous report on the utility of wars is still in the world collective memory (Galbraith, 1984). For a US report, war and war threats are necessary for the American market economy and politic stability. Capitalism is able to resist to wars and economic crises, because it is neither warlike nor peaceful when scarcity is not generalized. However, with the shortage of natural resources, there is a new potential obstacle to the capitalist peace and to the sustainable development. History shows that democracy is no more a guarantee of peace (Richard, 2010) that the spread of free trade in the world. Some leaders may have an interest in war, even in a democratic regime, faced with the inability of a peaceful settlement of problems through negotiation.

## **V. War as a solution for national power and domination effects**

For Clausewitz, war is the continuation of the policy by other means (*si vis pacem, para bellum*)". For List, a supporter of the national political economic system, in the absence of the realization of "natural borders", the "laissez faire" led to the economic domination of the strongest. States have to protect themselves against the products of foreign countries when the economic situations of the countries are heterogeneous in terms of power, technological progress and capital availability, and before the necessary process able to give to the States their natural boundaries. War must be an efficient instrument to obtain the second solution. Moreover, he theorized the importance of patriotism and the economic utility of war in certain circumstances, to enhance national strength on the world scene. The German historical school advocated for State economic intervention and for public support for the promotion of the national power. In this regard, they also often insist on the virtues of the war for the promotion of the national interest. Economic power often led to political power. Nations have always been organized vertically in a hierarchical division of labour. Economy is not a matter of good or wrong, it is a matter of strong or weak, there is no



code of honour, and protectionism is not a sin. War was the main cause of the development of productive forces and European industrial revolution. Military needs of the armed conflict have created the preconditions for the development of capitalism in fostering the establishment of large markets, mass consumption, incentive to industrialization, technological innovation, spirit of competition and growth the financial sector (through the management of the military government debt).

For Veblen, the modern capitalist tendency was in favour of peaceful commercial interests, but the dynastic societies (such as Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) still maintained military conflicts and mercantilist policies for the survival of the political, military and economic power of their Nation. It was the main causes of the two World wars. In 1914, the first world war was caused by the new economic and political power of Germany that has no empire such as England, France or Russia for its economy and raw materials. From 1934, the "state capitalism" established in Germany gave all economic and politic powers to the Nazi government to revive the economy, eliminate unemployment, develop a strong industrial base and organize an economic system autarkic. The cost of this effort has been supported by low wages and by the use of the war threats intimidation in order to obtain unequal exchange with neighbouring countries. The repatriation of German capital invested abroad even led to a worldwide boycott of German goods. Imports were limited to raw materials needed for rearmament only, following conflicting negotiations on prices. With his "New Plan" Schacht organized autarky and decided a moratorium on debts denominated in foreign currencies. In a situation of German debt renegotiation, he organized nearly insolvency of Germany, proposing a payment in Reichsmarks with its international creditors to avoid a heavier debt declared. This policy of barter and power relations could only lead to war. International trade principles were violated, without being at the origin of the conflict. In this situation, economy was completely dependant of the war preparation, and economic growth was not sustainable, but in rapid crisis in peace situation (Fontanel, 2014). War is the only one issue of this kind of growth, organized on the basis of industrial military complex.

The connection between economy and war is complex, one and the other, in turn, being end and means. Nuclear weapons reduced the propensity for conflict between the major powers, which agree to militarily enforce their interests. The economy has become the main field of action of the power plays. The economy itself is a weapon intended to impoverish or to destabilize the enemy country (sanctions, blockades, destruction). In this context, economic optimization gives way in search of relative power between states. The national security may be threatened by an arms race, by international military and economic domination, but also by indirect strategies of dissuasion and economic forms of retaliation, such as embargoes and boycotts. With a declaration of intention from States, economic factors become weapons. The impoverishment

strategy is often presented as one of the basic reasons for the collapse of the Soviet economy. State seeks supremacy by indirect means, in order to weak the enemy to the point of economic destabilization. It was the case in the 1980s, with the violence of the costs of arms race with a large difference of economic development between NATO and Warsaw Pact. The collapse of the Soviet economy was probably favoured by the implementation of the strategy of impoverishment by the increased effort and disproportionate in preparation for war in relation to its national development potential. There exist a lot of different strategies such as political violence, destabilization of the national economy or domination effects. In that case, the economy is no longer the quest for material “well being”, but one of the means of ensuring world or social domination.

It seems impossible to establish the inherent pacifism or militarism of the different models of capitalism. The U.S. authorities intervene to strengthen the national power on global markets, through the spread of the soft power but also through the support of national firms, thanks to protectionism and subsidies. A world war could ultimately result from the economic crisis caused by the exhaustion of the capitalist mode of regulation, due to the gradual worsening of international tensions. Military alliances are often dominated by a State, such as USA. It is certainly the reason that is so difficult to solve for a European defence Union (Fontanel, Smith, 1991). The growth of military spending increases the virtual power of the states, but nuclear weapons is mainly useful for deterrence strategy, except in so violent situations of conflict that the question of the survival of humanity is no longer a querying for its users (Fontanel, 1995). The current economic crisis also raises many questions about the sustainability of huge structural imbalances (indebtedness in the North, trade surpluses in the emergent countries) and of an excessive and increasingly vulnerable global finance (Galbraith, J., 2010).

## **VII. The religious or philosophical war, against materialism and globalization process**

The absence of major conflict between capitalist countries since the end of World War II reinforced the idea that wars were gradually become obsolete with the development of capitalism, mainly because of the proliferation of international institutions intended to resolve trade disputes peacefully, to avoid major economic crises and to increase economic and financial interdependencies between major powers. Today, military actions have no direct predation objectives. However, in a context of economic international dependence, superpowers understand that without their weapons' threats, they depend on all states that take their forces from strategic production or resources. But wars have not disappeared with the spread of capitalism around the world.

For UNDP (PNUD, 1999), the hallmarks of globalization should be ethics (the fight against violations of human rights), equity in mitigation national and international disparities, integration (refusal of exclusion and marginality), human security reduction of the system instability and respect the collective rules), sustainability (the struggle for environmental conservation) and development (decline in poverty and misery). The logic of economic and financial globalization encourages productivity gains, production growth, industrial innovations and State power inequalities (Fontanel, 2007). A major power has a strong economy, a reliable currency, a large control of his communication and energy needs, an active diplomatic policy, an attractive cultural life, a capacity to act outside its own borders to insure the transfer of the vital resources and sometimes a nuclear strategic force (Fontanel, Hébert, 1993b).

The idea of a decrease economic growth in order to reduce the demand for natural resources is rarely taken up, despite the growing trend towards environmental scarcity and induced conflicts in developing countries. Economic and energy scarcities are strategic stakes that are strong effects on the wars probability (Fontanel, 1993b). The influence of the military sector in the capitalist world is still very high and their effects on poorer countries are usually occasions for new violence and civil wars (Fontanel, 1990).

Today, globalization offers an opportunity for a universal, civil and permanent, war (Fontanel, 2005). Sometimes, the imperatives of national security seem more important than international economic exchanges. The idea of restricting the pace of global economic growth to reduce the depletion of natural resources is ruled out by international institutions, with the concept of sustainable development. However, globalization experiences seem to reduce social protection and solidarity. It is the expression of a daily civil war for the distribution of wealth. Peoples are engaged in violent protests, social unrest and a constant refusal of the dominant civilization of economism and materialism, funded on optimal profit research. The question of whether the "hungry" are able to rebel has always been the subject of debate. The poor development led to the conflict, but it hinders the development, with human destruction or infrastructure and the abandonment of productive effort. Today, the "warlords", mercenaries and "off-the-law" are seeking to take control of scarce resources, with even greater ease than the arms trade is flourishing (Fontanel, 1995).

The "strategists" of major powers today insist on protecting the interests of the developed countries against the growing threats of southern countries, in terms of terrorism, civil war, production of weapons of mass destruction (like nuclear) and threats of international pariahs conflict over the country ("rogue states") such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Daesch, Libya, North Korea. The global political and economic insecurity grows with the development of nationalism and religious fundamentalism, the collapse of the management of states, illegal migration, ethnic conflicts or economic underdevelopment (Sen, 2002). While

capitalism is sometimes allied with them, religious fundamentalists want to take power, rejecting particular market values. In the framework of democracy and capitalism report, it is difficult to have both an egalitarian political ideology and an economic system that produces strong inequalities. The loss of human security is a slow and insidious problem that increases with unsuitable political choices and natural disasters. The globalization discourse of mutual economic development is vague and unclear. It fails to the problems of precariousness, life standard, individual liberty security and justice. Poorer are the new slaves of the system, and workers are exploited by a constant reduction of their life standard and precariousness. When materialism and properties are the main objective of life, and the inequalities grow, life becomes so difficult that frustrations become the basis of religious fundamentalism, with the objective to create a new world in close relations with the words of God. For Amartya Sen (1981, 2002), a modern society is able of supplying important rights for each, what he calls "entitlements". In other words, a nation will be developed only when it will be capable of insuring the freedom, the democracy, the equity (and not the equality), and the respect for all and for each.

Globalization and universality are not going together. Globalization regards technologies, markets, tourism or information. Universality concerns values, human rights, liberties, culture, and democracy. According to Baudrillard, if actual globalization process is irreversible, then universal is dying out. War is still a humanity problem.

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