

The Violence of the Postwar: Historical Cases of Punitive Peace and the Current Brazilian Situation

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Throughout history, the end of wars does not necessarily close the violence against defeated societies. In most cases, winners head the negotiations of the peace process. The talks often involve resentments and always different national interests about the future and the post-war features.

Amid the great inequality of force correlation, the victors redefine direct or indirectly, on some level, the new kind of insertion of the defeated in the international system and determine some aspects of social life in the conquered territories. The decisions imply economic matters, political aspects, military issues, and others topics. At the edge, even questions about ethical parameters are defined by the result of the conflict.

What is immoral?

Who are the war criminals?

For instance, Robert McNamara, former United States Secretary of Defense (1961-68), said something about it in a documentary. According to him,

“[Curtis Emerson] LeMay said, ‘If we’d lost the war, we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals.’ And I think he’s right. He and I’d say I were behaving as war criminals. LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?”.¹

Sometimes, the destructuring, or even the destruction, of the defeated society is chosen as a principle of strategic orientation, guiding the post-war life in the territories. In this case, the peace becomes a winners’ instrument of violence, as a punitive peace.

In the First Opium War (1840-42), with the Chinese defeat by the British navy, the Treaty of Nanjing was signed in 1842, and it established that: i) the island of Hong Kong would become an English domain; ii) there would be the opening of five ports; iii) the end of the association of Chinese merchants’ monopoly; and iv) the imposition of a series of indemnities.

The Second Opium War followed the same dynamic, with a new unequal treaty, Tianjin (1858), ratified in the Beijing Convention in 1860. It defined, among other things, the opening of new ports, the granting of extraterritoriality to European foreigners, and the free movement of traders on Chinese territory. The violence was described by the famous French writer, Victor Hugo, mainly the sack of the summer palace, which occurred in the context of the Second Opium War, in a [letter to captain Buttler](#) in November 1861. In his words,

"The devastation of the Summer Palace was accomplished by the two victors acting jointly. (...) One of the two victors filled his pockets; when the other saw this he filled his coffers. And back they came to Europe, arm in arm, laughing away. Such is the story of the two bandits. We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us, the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism."

In the First World War, Germany was defeated by the Triple Entente and its allies, and the famous Versailles Treaty of 1919 settled the terms of the peace.

In its second part, it redrew the borders of Germany, and, in the third, it determined territorial reparations as part of the compensation for the damage caused. It also obligated it to demobilize and significantly reduce its armed forces. In the well-known article 231, the guilt clause, Germany had to take responsibility for the conflict. Based on it, heavy debts of war reparation on behalf of the victors were imposed, keeping Germany in a very vulnerable economic-social situation for many years. The violence of the Versailles peace was analyzed by John Maynard Keynes in his book *"The Economic Consequences of Peace"*. According to him,

*"Their preoccupations [of victoriosaes], good and bad alike, related to frontiers and nationalities, to the balance of power, to imperial aggrandizements, to the future enfeeblement of a strong and dangerous enemy, to revenge, and to the shifting by the victors of their unbearable financial burdens on to the shoulders of the defeated."*²

One recent case of a punitive peace was the post-Cold War and the breaking up of the USSR in 1991. Although a direct conflict did not occur, not even a negotiation on the new world order, let alone a peace treaty or international agreement, what prevailed in practice was the strategy of the victor to punish the loser. Based on a Shock Therapy Program implemented by orthodox Western economists, such as Andrei Shleifer, Jeffrey Sachs, David Lipton, and Anders Åslund, the dismantling of the Russian economy came about.

According to [Numa Mazat](#), the Shock Therapy Program imposed a policy of price liberalization, the opening of the Russian economy, a recessive economic policy of harsh expenditure control, and an intensive privatization plan of state-owned companies. As a result, throughout the nineties, it caused a violent economic-social crisis: real GDP fell by more than 51% between 1990-1998; investment, 81% between 1991-1998; agricultural production, 45% between 1992-1998; real wages, 58% between 1990-1999; and the number of poor people increased from 2% to 39% between 1988-1995.⁴ Furthermore, separatist wars, some instigated by foreign powers, broke out in various regions of the country.

In the case of Brazil, would it be possible to consider that the country lived in a background of warfare from 2008 to 2016, although its authorities were not aware of it? A kind of unconventional, hybrid, fourth generation war? If so, could it be correct to regard that Brazil

was defeated and, nowadays, it is undergoing a context of punitive peace?

In a [previous opportunity](#), one has discussed the fact that Brazil carried out an independent foreign policy during the Workers' Party administrations (2003-2016), throughout different initiatives on critical matters in international relations, suffering attacks from the most powerful country in the world, due to geostrategic antagonisms of hard overcoming that arisen with the United States.

The "Brazilian Spring" ended in 2016 with the coup against Rousseff's elected government. Since then, Brazilian foreign policy has changed abruptly, returning to an old tradition of automatic alignment with Washington. From then on, Brazilian society has become a target of various kinds of violence.

First, there have been economic-social initiatives to redefine some aspects of social life: the flexibilization in labor legislation, withdrawing rights; the reform of social security, removing benefits from the poorest people; the effective reduction of spending on education, and public health. Even before the pandemic, the effects of these actions emerged as an increase in unemployment, inequality, poverty, and hunger. When the virus spread throughout the country, the federal government assumed a denialist and anti-scientific behavior, worsening the situation. As a [general result](#), it is not surprising that, since 2016,

"GDP per capita is lower than before the impeachment, inequality, and poverty are on the rise, and democracy has deteriorated, figures show."

Second, since 2016, it has taken a destructuring or destruction of various state instruments to the assurance of national security; the achievement of an autonomous insertion in the international system; and the promotion of social and economic development. For example, after the coup, the governments have sponsored the dismantling of Petrobrás, production chains linked to the oil and gas sector, and the naval industry. In favor of foreign companies, the administrations have already altered the oil exploration policy regarding the control on production, destination, and price. They have promoted the decommissioning of national engineering companies which were responsible for the most extensive infrastructure projects in the country. It has engaged in the emptying of public banks (Bank of Brazil, Federal Savings Bank, and National Bank for Economic and Social Development), which are central to the funding of the development of all the economic sectors. It has worked to undermine the federal institutions of education and promotion of scientific research in the country, such as public universities, Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development.

Finally, the third sort of violence focuses more directly on some of the bases that structure the very idea of sovereignty. One could highlight the negotiation for the handout of the Alcântara base to the US, assuming the risk of allowing the most powerful country in the system to install a military position inside Brazilian territory.

In conclusion, Brazil will have to learn through History the nature of the challenges and the dynamics of the conflicts in order to react and rebuild possible paths, leaving a context of a punitive peace for repositioning itself in the international system, as other countries, such as China and Russia, have already done.

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Notes

1 *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Produced and directed by *Errol Morris*. *Sony Pictures Classics*. 2003.

2 Keynes, J. M. *The Economic Consequences of Peace*. Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1919. p. 22).

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