

GENERATORS OF UNIVERSALITY – ARGUMENTATION SCHEMES USED IN THE GULF WAR DEBATE*

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Introduction

The following pages present some selected results from an analysis of the public debate that emerged within the “Western World” in the forefront of the Third Gulf War in 2003.¹ In March of that year allied forces under the leadership of the United States of America attacked Iraq which at that time was governed by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Following the account of the aggressors, the military campaign was executed out of two motives: (1) the first was self-defense, insofar as Hussein was suspected to dispose of vast amounts of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) that he could possibly use against his neighboring countries and, through the aid of Islamist terror groups, even against Western nations; (2) the second was the liberation of the suppressed Iraqi people. Political leaders of the allied countries argued that these two motives would render the military action not just politically rational, but at the same time morally legitimate.²

In spite of this claim, the moral legitimacy of the Third Gulf War was controversial at its time and stays to be to this day. This fact longs for an explanation given the widespread thesis of a consensus on values consolidating the Western hemisphere: if the discussants in the Gulf War debate were measuring by the same normative standards, then how did they come to moral conclusions that were diametrically opposed to each other? The study from which the following results are taken tried to give an answer to this question from the viewpoint of the sociology of knowledge which regards the genesis as well as the validity of knowledge (as e.g. of moral judgments) according to socio-cultural factors. Thus, the moral aspect, which stood in the focus of research, was investigated within the broader context of the various dimensions of the debate – political, economical, juridical etc. In a nutshell, the conclusion says that the different cultural and societal backgrounds of the participants in the debate

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¹ **Göttlich, A.** *Geteilte Moral. Die westliche Wertgemeinschaft und der Streit um den Dritten Golfkrieg.* Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2012.

² According to the doctrine of „pre-emptive strike“, adopted by the US-president at that time, a military attack is justified in order to prevent a perceived offensive which is on the verge of being conducted. In addition, in the eyes of those advocating the war, the ruthless brutality of the Hussein-regime against its own people outweighed the risk of civilians being killed in the course of the “liberation”.

shaped specific views on the topic in question, which as a consequence led to contradicting judgments concerning the moral legitimacy of the Third Gulf War.

Methodologically, empirical research performed a contrasting analysis of the argumentation of four participants in the Gulf-War debate: the US-administration under George W. Bush, the British Labour Government under Tony Blair, the Catholic Church in Germany, and the Protestant Church in Germany. This considering of representatives of different cultures and different societal fields was chosen in order to survey a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds which, according to the theoretical approach, provides the explaining factor of the moral controversy. A first step of analysis reconstructed the different perspectives that the aforementioned participants took with regard to the issue. This was done by applying the theory of relevance developed by Alfred Schutz,³ which allowed tracing the differences between the thematic, interpretational and motivational relevancies of the discussants. On this basis, a second step that was performed by hermeneutical analyses discovered argumentation strategies which permitted the discussants to present their particular standpoints as universalizable and therefore morally legitimate. This paper is concerned with three concepts that stand in the center of said strategies: god, reason, and time. As they (allegedly) allow the metamorphosis of individual perspectives into universal viewpoints, I named them “generators of universality”.

The article consists of three parts: (1) the first part delineates the specific problem the discussants faced within the context of the moral debate; (2) the second part introduces the way in which the concepts of god, reason, and time were used to solve this problem; (3) the third part discusses from a sociological point of view the possible prospects of success of the reconstructed argumentation strategies within the context of a global discourse on moral issues – a discourse that in reality did not happen.

Particular Standpoints – Universal Claims

According to the approach of the sociology of knowledge, the explanation for the moral controversy that arose in the debate on the Third Gulf War has to be sought in the specific viewpoints of the various discourse participants. These are determined by individual cultural and historical backgrounds, and therefore each of these viewpoints is particular. Now, this particularity contradicts the core element of morality as such, that is, the postulate of universalization.⁴ Whatever concept of morality we look at, we find the idea that only arguments that can be universalized can persist in the light of moral reflection. Three well-known examples may illustrate this point:

1. The Categorical Imperative developed by Immanuel Kant claims: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.”⁵ In other words, the in-

³ **Schutz, A.** Reflections on the Problem of Relevance, in: *Collected Papers V: Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*. Ed. by Lester Embree. Dordrecht et al.: Springer 2011, p. 93–199.

⁴ **Wimmer, R.** *Universalisierung in der Ethik. Analyse, Kritik und Rekonstruktion ethischer Rationalitätsansprüche*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1980.

⁵ **Kant, I.** *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis et al.: Bobbs-Merrill 1959, p. 39.

dividual is supposed to consider what the world would be like if everyone else followed those motives of action that he is about to follow.

2. In his “Theory of Justice” John Rawls argues that the principles of justice should be chosen behind a veil of ignorance which deprives the parties of all knowledge of particular facts about themselves, about one another, and even about their society and its history.⁶ If one does not know about one’s own identity and therewith about one’s societal status, then one cannot estimate whether a specific principle of justice will be of advantage for oneself or not. Therefore, says Rawls, under the veil of ignorance one will choose such principles which one can accept regardless of one’s own identity or societal status.

3. The Golden Rule, as used in everyday life, says that one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself. Thus it urges us to consider the consequences of our action towards others by assuming a fundamental relation of reciprocity.

When looking closely, one can surely detect considerable differences between the three examples, and yet they all follow a similar intuition: Moral behavior presupposes the abandoning of one’s own particular viewpoint and to consider the demands and interests of others – in short, it presupposes universalization. Now, if it is right what has been said above, namely that the participants in the debate on the Third Gulf War all argued from their particular point of view, then how could they present their argumentation as being moral in the first place?

Thus, the discussants in the Gulf War debate shared a common practical problem which differs in principal from the intellectual problem of philosophers like Kant or Rawls. These thinkers were not looking for solutions of discrete moral problems, but rather for a general rule whose observance can principally create moral judgments and therewith – supposed people act according to their judgments – moral behavior. They were, to put it in other words, concerned with the foundation of morality. The participants in the discourse on the Gulf War, in contradistinction, not only had to answer a concrete question: shall the Western nations start a military campaign here and now? In addition, they had to justify the outcome of their moral considerations in the face of a separated public. Whatever conclusion they would come to, it had to be compatible on the one hand with the patterns of thought of their particular clientele – the electorate in case of the British and the US-government, the church members in case of the Catholic as well as the Protestant Church. Because of impending loss of power they were forced to give an answer to the moral question which seemed plausible to the demands and interests of their followers, that is, to a particular point of view. On the other hand, in front of the world public they had to demonstrate that the decision for or against the war is not only in the interest of their own nation or institution, but also for the whole world – at least potentially.

Generators of Universality: God, Reason, and Time

To subsume, because of a specific double-bind the participants in the discourse on the Third Gulf War were all confronted with a structural problem:

⁶ Rawls J. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999.

they had to reconcile the particularity of their own perspective towards the war, constituted by specific interests and world-views, with the moral postulate of universalization, which demands to offer only arguments of general validity. Empirical research uncovered three concepts used by the discussants in order to achieve this aim: god, reason and time. All three of them are perceived as allowing the generalization of a moral argument despite of its genetic background in a particular socio-historic setting. Or to put it more abstractly, they are designed to enable the transition from contingency to evidence, from is to ought.

The way in which each concept was designed in order to fulfill this task can be best described by giving concrete examples from the empirical data:

1. *God*: The idea of an all knowing god who created mankind includes the idea of a perspective which transcends all individual points of view. Someone who studies the will and thoughts of that god may participate in his universal perspective; he can even be chosen for his mouthpiece that speaks out the universal truth. So it comes as no surprise when I quote the former Pope John Paul II as a representative of this kind of argumentation. In a speech he held in Assisi in the year 2002, he argues:

“God himself has placed in the human heart an instinctive tendency to live in peace and harmony. This desire is more deeply-rooted and determined than any impulse to violence; it is a desire that we have come together to reaffirm here, in Assisi. We do so in the awareness that we are representing the deepest sentiment of every human being.”

In this passage universal validity comes as a result of the action of god who installed the love for peace more deeply in the hearts of man than the impulse to violence. Thus, the positioning against the war appears not so much as the outcome of a historical process during which a specific interpretation of the Holy Bible has become accepted, but rather as the effect of the return to human nature.

2. *Reason*: Another option to postulate the universal validity of an argument is provided by the notion of a common human reason. This reason is supposed to be free of cultural or ideological deformations and therefore to provide a common denominator between conflicting perspectives. What allows for this performance is the prosaic orientation on “brute facts”⁷. The principal idea says that beyond its diverging interpretations there is a factual world, common to mankind, so that the one who is able to gain knowledge about this world reaches a universal standpoint. In the Gulf War debate this form of argumentation was used by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair under the label of “a hard-headed pragmatism”. The globalized world, he argued, is foremost characterized by the increasing interrelatedness of national interests, and this facticity would render an international politics of non-interference obsolete. *“Like it or not”*, Blair said in a speech at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library in 2002, *“whether you are a utilitarian or a Utopian, the world is interdependent. One consequence of this is that foreign and domestic policy are ever more closely interwoven.”* From this insight of allegedly universal validity he developed a

⁷ Searle J. R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

moral argument in favor of a military intervention in Iraq, being not only in the interest of Great Britain or the USA, but also of the whole world.

3. *Time*: The third “generator of universality” which was found in the data is the one that was most prominent in the Gulf War debate. Discussants frequently made the attempt to distinguish a certain point in historic time and to conceptualize it as a morally superior point of view. Take for example the following remark by former US-president George W. Bush, made on the occasion of Veterans Day 2003:

“The United States will complete our work in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Democracy in those two countries will succeed. And that success will be a great milestone in the history of liberty. A democratic revolution that has reached across the globe will finally take root in the Middle East.”

This argumentation presented by Bush assumes a certain process of cultural evolution that is shared by the USA and Iraq – with the crucial difference that the former have already lived through this process whereas the latter is still waiting for it. Therefore the USA reside at a “higher” stage which implies a more advanced perspective. The according moral point of view outweighs the one from a “lower” stage, because one day in the future this lower stage will be overcome.

In the way illustrated by the examples, the concepts of god, reason and time allowed the discussants in the Gulf War debate to present arguments of allegedly universal validity. Argumentation strategies adopting these concepts have been used across the different camps of advocates and opponents of war, so that they cannot be assigned to them distinctively. Yet in terms of typification one may say that the concept of god is frequently adopted by the Christian Churches, the concept of reason by the British ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the concept of time by former US-President George W. Bush.

Theoretical Reflection

In this last section of my paper, I will discuss the empirical findings from the standpoint of social theory. The general purpose of this discussion is to estimate from a scientific point of view the prospects of success of the described argumentation schemes within the context of a global discourse on morals – or to put it in the terms of Max Weber, the “objective chance”⁸ to win over discussants from other cultures for the own moral standpoint.

In order to provide such an estimation one must necessarily tread into the field of speculation as the actual Gulf War debate was dominated by representatives of the Western World and did not include for example the Iraqi people itself. From the empirical standpoint one can only state that even within the occidental context none of the strategies was able to produce an all-encompassing consent – the moral legitimacy of the military campaign stays controversial until these days. To judge the prospect of success within a global discussion, which in reality did not happen, necessitates indeed judging mere potentialities.

⁸ **Weber, M.** Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Berkeley et. al.: University of California Press, 1968.

My attempt to do so takes the approach of the sociology of knowledge. From this point of view, one can show that the three concepts of god, reason and time are culture-specific – at least when they are used in order to prepare concrete moral conclusions as is the case in the data.

1. To begin with the concept of god: even if one accepts that all cultures have to deal with experiences of transcendence and therefore must develop some notion of divinity, the particular idea of god adopted by Pope John Paul II, that is, of a god who “has placed in the human heart an instinctive tendency to live in peace and harmony”, is anything else but universal. In his writings on the sociology of religion, Max Weber has contrasted the Western notion of a personal, world-transcending creator, which is associated with a theocentric worldview, with the notion of a non-personal cosmic order, which is associated with a cosmocentric worldview.⁹ And even within the Christian tradition itself the peace-loving god mentioned by John Paul II has its counterpart in the wrathful god of the Old Testament who devastated Sodom and Gomorrah.

2. Regarding the concept of reason, Tony Blair’s idea of a hard-headed description of reality, which to adopt is more reasonable than other perceptions, draws its evidence from a particular premise, namely that there is a world of facts which exists independently of its interpretations. Let away your ideological deformations, one may paraphrase, and you will see the world in its objective facticity that counts for all! Now, this portrayal contradicts the very core of social constructivism (from Schutz to Luhmann, from Berger and Luckmann to Foucault), saying that reality can only be grasped by way of interpretation and that this interpretation is determined by socio-cultural factors.

3. As for the third concept, we may well accept not only that, according to Immanuel Kant, time is one of the two a priori forms of perception,¹⁰ but also that all of mankind shares the same time in a physical sense. And yet the notion of a historical process that stands in the background of the argumentation of George W. Bush implies a particular interpretation of history which again is anything else but universal. His talk of a “2,500 year story of democracy” looks as a rather one-sided interpretation even with regard only to the history of the Western culture, and it gets quite dubious if one tries to apply it to a wider context. Already a hundred years ago Oswald Spengler has shown that world history must be understood as the coexistence and consecution of various and more or less separated civilization processes.¹¹

In this way, the sociological reflection on the three concepts of god, reason and time comes to the general result that their application in the Gulf War debate refers to particular conditions. The god mentioned by the Pope is one among others; it is the outcome of a historical interpretation process and therefore bound to a particular social setting. Tony Blair’s description of the factual world, that claims to be more reasonable than concurring accounts, is one interpretation among others; it is the expression of a particular way of political think-

⁹ **Weber, M.** *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Roxbury, 2002.

¹⁰ **Kant, I.** *Critique of Pure Reason*. Indianapolis et al.: Hackett, 1996.

¹¹ **Spengler, O.** *The Decline of the West*. New York: Knopf, 1926.

ing which has its roots in British history. And the historical process mentioned by George W. Bush in order to outline a common future of mankind is the product of a selective view on the history of only a part of the world; a view that is cast from the particular standpoint of an US-president at the beginning of the 21st century.

This result suggests that the argumentation schemes found in the data are not likely to be successful within the context of a global discourse on morals – successful in terms of winning over discussants from other cultures. They seem plausible only to members of the particular socio-cultural settings to which they are bound. Just because everybody has an understanding of the concepts of god, reason and time, the various understandings do not necessarily have to converge. In fact, it is precisely sociological thinking which teaches us that they do not. Therefore the usage of such concepts within a moral discourse may well demonstrate universalistic thinking on the surface, yet as a sociologist one cannot concede that they produce arguments of really universal validity just like that.

However, maybe this was not the intention of the discussants at all. The social structures they were arguing in – national states and religious organizations – are designed to restrict them to a way of argumentation that highlights the demands and interests of a specific clientele on which they depend in terms of power. To convince social entities outside one's own circle seems to be necessary only if one is interested in an all-encompassing consensus, which seemed superfluous for the political leaders of military powerful nations like the USA and Great Britain and idle for the Christian Churches. From a sociological point of view, one must therefore state that as long as the structural preconditions of intercultural debates on moral issues, like for example the legitimacy of military campaigns, stay the way they are now, it is highly unlikely that the participants in such debates are willing and able to generate moral arguments of universal validity. As long as their actions do not depend on a world-wide consensus, they will rather use formal concepts like god, reason and time to fill them with individual contents –thereby ending up speaking about their own god, their own reason, and their own time.

ԱՆԴՐԵԱՍ ԳՈՏՏԼԻՆ – Ունիվերսալիաների աղբյուրները. Պարսից ծոցի պատերազմի շուրջ ծավալված դեբատներում կիրառված փաստարկողական սխեմաները – Հոդվածում ներկայացվում է ԱՄՆ-ի և դաշնակից պետությունների կողմից 2003 թ. Պարսից ծոցում երրորդ պատերազմը ձեռնարկելու փաստարկների ու պատճառաբանությունների վերլուծությունը՝ ըստ սոցիոլոգիական տեսությունների, այդ թվում՝ գիտելիքի սոցիոլոգիայի, Ալֆրեդ Շուտցի և ֆեմինիզմի սոցիոլոգիական մոտեցումների: Այս իմաստով հատկապես ուշագրավ է պատերազմի ոչ միայն քաղաքական, այլև բարոյական լեգիտիմացման գործընթացի վերլուծությունը: Հեղինակը գտնում է, որ լեգիտիմացման գործընթացը մի կողմից պայմանավորված է պատերազմին մասնակից պետությունների նույնանման քաղաքական դիրքորոշումների, իսկ մյուս կողմից՝ խիստ տարբեր և նույնիսկ միմ-

յանց հակասող փաստարկումներով: Մասնավորապես, պատերազմի մասնակիցների տեղեկատվական գործընթացներում հիմնականում կարելի է առանձնացնել սոցիալ-մշակութային առանձնահատկություններով բացատրվող ընդհանրացված փաստարկները, որոնք ընդհանուր առմամբ բաժանվել են երեք խմբի. 1. որոշման հիմնավորումը կապվում է Աստծո գաղափարի և կանքի հետ, 2. ցույց են տրվում պատճառահետևանքային կապերը և կոչված են արդարացնելու պատերազմը՝ որպես անխուսափելի իրողություն, 3. օգտագործվում է ժամանակային գործոնը, և պատերազմի իրականացման մասին որոշումը բացատրում են հրատապությամբ ու պատմականությամբ:

АНДРЕАС ГОТТЛИХ – *Источники универсалий: аргументативные схемы, использованные в дебатах вокруг войны в Персидском заливе.* – В статье представлен социологический анализ аргументативных процессов вокруг третьей войны в Персидском заливе, которую вели США и союзные страны в 2003 году. На основе теории социологии знания и теоретических подходов Альфреда Шюца, а также феноменологии выделены два главных подхода к легитимации странами – участницами интервенции в Ираке своих военных решений. Это, во-первых, сугубо политические аргументы, а во-вторых, аргументы моральные. Характерно, что у стран, участвовавших в военной операции, были единые политические мотивы, тогда как их морально-нравственные обоснования сильно, подчас очень сильно различались. В статье выделены три группы универсальных аргументов, или универсалий, которые применялись в дебатах: 1. апелляции к Богу; 2. причинно-следственные связи; 3. ссылки на время (война в Ираке изображалась крайне своевременной и даже безотлагательной).