

HYBRID SECURITY
THE CONSTITUTION OF A COGNITIVE PARADIGM ACROSS SOCIAL COMPLEXITY,
EMERGING RIGHTS, AND DEMOCRATIC SOVEREIGNTY

SICUREZZA IBRIDA
LA COSTITUZIONE DI UN PARADIGMA COGNITIVO FRA COMPLESSITÀ SOCIALE,
DIRITTI EMERGENTI E SOVRANITÀ DEMOCRATICA

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Abstract: the article examines the transformation of security threats within an international environment marked by growing complexity and unconventional hostile actions. The notion of «hybridity», often used descriptively in strategic studies, is reframed as a structural property of contemporary political and social systems shaped by non-linear interdependencies. Protecting cognitive infrastructures requires a security paradigm that combines democratic resilience, the safeguarding of fundamental freedoms and the governance of complexity, while avoiding autoimmune reactions and post-democratic forms of governmental control.

Keywords: Hybrid security – Hybrid threats – Social complexity – Democratic sovereignty – Cognitive infrastructures

Abstract: l'articolo analizza la trasformazione delle minacce alla sicurezza in un contesto internazionale segnato da complessità crescente e da posture ostili non convenzionali. La nozione di «ibridità», spesso impiegata in senso descrittivo negli studi strategici, viene ricondotta a una proprietà strutturale dei sistemi politici e sociali contemporanei, caratterizzati da interdipendenze non-lineari. La protezione delle infrastrutture cognitive richiede un paradigma di sicurezza capace di coniugare resilienza democratica, tutela delle libertà e gestione della complessità, evitando derive autoimmunitarie e forme di governamentalità post-democratica.

Keywords: Sicurezza ibrida – Minacce ibride – Complessità sociale – Sovranità democratica – Infrastrutture cognitive

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1. The paradoxical European condition between elusive threats and a concrete need for security¹

The international order is currently experiencing new and paradoxical conditions², which suggest a process far deeper than a transitional phase marked by the readjustment of old equilibria. Not only has the post–Cold War framework (and even the post-1945 one³) entered into crisis⁴, abruptly and unexpectedly reshaping strategic and diplomatic alignments previously taken for granted; not only is the international system and its institutions increasingly unable to resolve, or at least mitigate, frictions between States. Added to all this are structural changes never observed before. Among these, particular importance is assumed by the phenomenon whereby, alongside a rise in assertiveness among various actors and a spreading of international conflictuality, one witnesses what Gastone Breccia has recently defined – with an effective formula, as concise as it is rich in implications – «the twilight of force»⁵. The expression highlights the circumstance whereby, in an increasingly dangerous and unstable global context, recourse to the military option is ever less preferred, and less preferable, compared to instruments of another nature. Yet this «twilight», rather than fostering conditions of stability and peace⁶, seems instead to have accentuated the premises for a diffusion of the «epidemic of insecurity»⁷.

¹ All quotations from texts not originally in English have been translated by the Author.

² «We live in an age of radical changes, whose causes, scope and future implications are not easy to grasp», G. Breccia, 2026, 49.

³ The reference is to the crisis within NATO, following the harsh stances taken by the President of the United States Donald Trump, but also to the increasingly marked heterogeneity among the international agendas of its members.

⁴ The reference is to the anti-European policy of U.S. President Donald Trump, but also to the progressive shift of the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity. Indeed, the international system is currently marked by the emergence of actors claiming greater agency in shaping the political, economic and institutional landscape — all the more so in light of the rapid disintegration of the institutions established after the Second World War. Chas W. Freeman suggests calling this structural shift «multi-nodal» rather than multipolar, since «A “pole” is the end of a line between two points. But the emerging order is a three-dimensional network, not a two-dimensional axis, or even a collection of axes. “Nodes” [...] are places where many connections of diverse sizes and intensities originate, terminate, and intersect on differing vectors. Multi-nodal is a more accurate depiction of the geopolitical geometry that is now emerging»; Ch. W. Freeman, 2024; text available at: <https://chasfreeman.net/surviving-the-world-order-to-come/>. The idea of an emerging multi-nodal international system echoes — and deepens — the notion of a multiplex world developed by Amitav Acharya in Id., 2014, Chap. 1. Structurally, all this brings to the surface a paradigm marked by complexity, on which there will be occasion to dwell more fully in what follows.

⁵ G. Breccia, 2026, 67.

⁶ On the vulnerability of peace among States and on the interpretation of peace as a «fragile human invention», all too often contradicted by an increasingly easy recourse to war, see the recent study on the history of peace treaties conducted by Gastone Breccia in Id., 2026.

⁷ The reference is to a recent and illuminating book by Alessandro Colombo: see Id., 2022.

The so-called «hybrid war» – and which would be more appropriate to call *hybrid warfare*⁸, that is, «hybrid conduct of war», as Breccia suggests⁹ – entails «not only the use of force (conventional or otherwise), but encompasses a whole series of non-violent hostile actions aimed at striking the enemy’s public opinion, its economy, its essential services»¹⁰. Within NATO, the notion has been framed in these terms:

«The term hybrid warfare began appearing more broadly in security literature about 2005. Originally it referred to confronting unconventional forces, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or local insurgents, such as those in Iraq. However, the term has become associated with the challenges posed by coordinated, novel, and not purely military malign actions undertaken by state actors. These actors have incorporated several nontraditional or nonconventional means to undercut national will, sow discord, confuse political actions and actors, and undermine national authority, political legitimacy, and the freedom to maneuver among target nations or populations»¹¹.

In short, the paradox in which Europe currently finds itself – caught between a war on its borders and clashes that put pressure on its main maritime trade routes¹² – lies in the fact that «the center of gravity of conflicts (*Schwerpunkt*) [...] has shifted from the battlefields [...] to the delicate internal balances of the belligerent countries»¹³. From this perspective, threats seem to take on unprecedented, unusual and insidious features¹⁴.

A «conceptual distillation» of the idea of *hybrid warfare* is captured in the notion of *cognitive warfare*, coined within strategic studies. It identifies cognitive infrastructures (television, newspapers, social networks, etc.) as the medium, and the psychological sphere of individuals as the target of «hybrid operations». These would consist of hostile initiatives that are covert, undeclared, and do not involve the use of force or violence yet are capable of undermining the political and social stability of the targeted countries. The Italian Defence General Staff defines the concept as follows:

«Cognitive Warfare (cognitive competition) can be defined as a multidomain operation (or part of one) that employs means, actions and tools across the connections between the classical domains (land, air, naval), the space and cyber domains, the information environment and the electromagnetic spectrum, influencing human behavior and generating effects in the cognitive dimension, with the aim of gaining an advantage over the adversary»¹⁵.

⁸ For a diachronic perspective on the genesis of this notion, see at least C. S. Grey, 1999; F. G. Hoffman, 2007 (considered the first to use the notion in its current meaning); E. Reichborn-Kjennerud, P. Cullen, 2016.

⁹ See G. Breccia, 2026, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ NATO, 2024, 16.

¹² See F. Maronta, 2026. See also AA.VV., Limes, 7, 2026.

¹³ G. Breccia, 2026, 52-53.

¹⁴ See M. Galeotti, 2022.

¹⁵ Stato Maggiore della Difesa, 2023, IV.

In short, *hybrid warfare* – of which *cognitive warfare* is one component – constitutes an entirely new form of threat, and within NATO has been defined as a *hybrid threat*. This new type of intimidation

«combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilise and undermine societies.

The speed, scale and intensity of hybrid threats have increased in recent years»¹⁶.

Although *hybrid warfare* and *hybrid threats* are in some respects similar in meaning, they are not true synonyms. They are related terms, insofar as «Both phrases attempt to affix a label to a number of related and emergent phenomena in the international security environment»¹⁷.

In fact, the dimension of *security* is the horizon addressed by the issues briefly recalled here. The first question that arises, therefore – almost consequentially – is: how can one respond effectively to challenges that are so complex and elusive, in order to guarantee internal peace within the affected States? How can these countries ensure their security when facing threats that, by «overstepping» the military domain, render traditional responses based on assertiveness and force ineffective or simply inadequate? The novelty of the phenomena involved, the structural nature of the ongoing changes, and the increasingly widespread use of advanced tools – which are themselves undergoing rapid development (quantum computing, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, etc.) – make it necessary to adopt a *new security paradigm*, one that is resilient yet effective, and capable of addressing different needs primarily connected to the protection of cognitive infrastructures: on the one hand, defending the information ecosystem, in order to safeguard public debate within democratic contexts; on the other, protecting citizens' freedom of opinion and expression, and the freedom of information of media operators, principles that constitute the pillars of the liberal-democratic form of government.

Alongside these security needs, however, there are also risks that must not be underestimated. The still-emerging nature of the phenomena under consideration is a conceptually unstable terrain, which seems capable of producing only vague expressions, which remain «problematic because of the inherent ambiguity in their use»¹⁸. As even NATO acknowledges, expressions such as *hybrid warfare*, *cognitive warfare* and *hybrid threats* are terms «that lack[...] precision, in the same manner that the term “terrorism”

¹⁶ Text available at: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/countering-hybrid-threats>. Page consulted on 23/07/2026.

¹⁷ NATO, 2024, 8.

¹⁸ Ivi, 16; the quotation contains a minimal licence (the plural instead of the singular): the original passage refers only to the term *hybrid warfare*.

does»¹⁹, and recent history clearly shows how many intolerable abuses have been committed under the shadow of this «label-notion». The lack of semantic accuracy becomes fully critical when one steps outside the field of military and strategic studies and adopts a theoretical perspective, one with a broader view that encompasses law, politics and society, that is, the domains actually affected by these phenomena.

At first glance, through this new «lens», one immediately sees a clear fact: the indeterminacy of concepts is the main threshold for misunderstandings or, worse, abuses. Indeed, the implicit assumption of hybrid warfare theories is that public opinion – citizens, or the *demos* – is intrinsically manipulable, regardless of individuals' levels of education or training, and of the diversity within social stratification. Or, according to a more prejudiced view, that the people are intrinsically fickle²⁰, and therefore naturally exposed to the seductive tactics of the enemy. Such a logic, if allowed to proliferate unchecked within public debate – if not tempered by a more lucid and broader theoretical perspective – can easily short-circuit into autoimmune responses: «witch hunts», «internal enemies»²¹. Even in good faith, the starting assumption is that citizens are passive subjects, susceptible to being influenced in their ideas, beliefs, and even values and convictions, by cognitive flows (information, messages, data) assembled *ad hoc* by actors outside the political sphere to which the recipients belong, and therefore – regardless of whether such content is true or not – supposedly capable of benefiting those actors in their strategic-political aims. A plausible consequence of such a posture is the adoption of forms of political paternalism that – perhaps in «soft» and especially *gradual* ways – restrict the freedoms that concern the cognitive sphere itself, and that fundamentally underpin the liberal order: freedom of thought, expression and the press²²; introducing forms of control over information flows and, in the most extreme cases, censorship.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ The prejudice against the people is a *topos* of modern philosophical-political literature. It encompasses reflections developed after the French Revolution, which viewed with deep diffidence and concern the most significant historical innovation introduced in 1789, namely the entry of the masses into political life. Current elitist and anti-popular (and, in a cryptic way, anti-democratic) postures are ultimately the product of the convergence of three different – yet consistently critical – approaches to the political protagonism of the masses, traceable at least to three authors: Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893).

²¹ History offers eloquent examples: the season of McCarthyism in the United States, fuelled by the climate of the Truman Doctrine, showed how an external threat can serve as the basis for an internal surveillance apparatus capable of restricting freedom and pluralism. See R. M. Fried, 1991.

²² The connection between these «cognitive freedoms» and liberalism has deep historical roots, since liberalism itself is a product of the affirmation of such freedoms, as attested by the provisions of emblematic constitutional texts – from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 (Art. 11) to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, from the Constitution of the Italian Republic (Art. 21) to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Arts. 18 and 19). The literature is no exception and shows how, from the outset, Enlightenment thought developed around fundamental freedoms: see J. Locke, 1994; J. S. Mill, 2000; Th. Paine, 2026; I. Kant, 2024. More recently, these arguments have been taken up and further developed by Jürgen Habermas in a text that is fundamental for contemporary political philosophy and the history of political thought: see Id., 2005.

Thus, the stakes are enormous. The instruments designed to protect democracies — which are, moreover, increasingly fragile and at risk²³ — may end up «killing the patient», effectively accomplishing the very aim attributed to their enemies, by pushing democratic government, along a *downward slope*, into forms of post-democratic governmentality²⁴. This is what makes the issue examined here so critically important.

If, on the one hand, it is true that a world in which traditional distinctions between internal/external, civilian/military, war/peace, human/non-human, public/private, physical/digital have collapsed generates an entirely new set of dangers that rational thought must name and address, it is equally true that the response cannot be simplistic or reactive. Above all, an adequate response — one aligned with the «multilevel» nature of the challenges underway — cannot come exclusively from military apparatuses and their research centers, which by definition focus on providing *armed* responses to *armed* threats. Securing complex and fragile ecosystems such as political and social systems is something entirely different, unless one wishes to make the mistake of overestimating potential dangers — namely *hybrid threats* (which, precisely as such, must be verified, measured and attributed) — while underestimating a certain risk: that of creating the

²³ See at least C. Crouch, 2005; N. Urbinati, 2014; C. Galli, 2023.

²⁴ See M. Foucault, 1978. With this term, the French philosopher seeks to frame the intersection of three phenomena. First, the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics that make it possible to exercise a very specific — and *complex* — form of power, whose primary target is the *population*, whose principal form of knowledge is *political economy* — and thus, more generally, the use of statistical and mathematical models of analysis — and whose essential technical instruments rely on *security dispositifs*. Second, Foucault refers to the tendency that, throughout the West, has led to the pre-eminence of the type of power we call «government» (composed of sovereignty and discipline); this has resulted, on the one hand, in the development of a whole series of specific apparatuses of command and control and, on the other, in the development of a whole series of bodies of *knowledge* functional to those apparatuses. Finally, the concept of governmentality captures the process through which the medieval State of justice, which became an administrative State in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, refined the governmental tactics that allow one to define what must fall within the State and what must not, what is public and what is private, what is «statist» and what is not; thus emerges a type of State no longer defined essentially by its physical, geographical territoriality, but by the *population*. And this governmental State, organised around the population and drawing upon and employing the instruments of economic knowledge, co-produces a society increasingly controlled by security dispositifs — above all within the context of a paternalistic prejudice toward the people, understood as an object rather than a subject of political action. On the premises that constitute the theoretical substratum of the notion of governmentality, see M. Foucault, 2005; 2014.

Anticipating a line that will be developed further on, governmentality can also be read as the *historical form* assumed by the management of *social complexity*. Indeed, the growth in population numbers has produced societies characterised by increasing interdependencies, accelerated informational flows and social systems with high relational density; all this has compelled States to develop governmental techniques capable of operating within *complex* environments. In this sense, governmentality is the — often ambivalent — response that modern institutions have elaborated to govern systems that can no longer be understood nor regulated through linear models. Security, when conceived within this framework, risks becoming a control dispositif that seeks to reduce social complexity to a set of manageable exact variables. It is precisely this risk that requires rethinking security as a paradigm capable of combining protection and freedom, without sliding into forms of government that neutralise the democratic dimension of complexity.

structural conditions for transforming liberal democracies into armed democracies, or worse, into authoritarian military systems²⁵.

To navigate this web of opposing risks and reach reasonable conclusions, the first step is to examine carefully the horizon from which institutional and academic observers warn of the approach of these threats. It is therefore necessary to clarify the dimension of *hybridity*, in order to understand whether and how the response can adapt to it — that is, whether it can be of the same nature, but of opposite sign²⁶. Such an inquiry cannot come from military, strategic or geopolitical studies²⁷, which are constitutionally prone to epistemic pareidolias that refract every source of meaning through the binary filter «friend/enemy» and through the lens — not falsifying, but certainly distorting — of power relations.

The distance between the strategic use of the term «hybrid» and its epistemological scope is not a mere terminological detail, but a decisive conceptual issue. The hybrid postures observed in the field of security are not simply tactical combinations of hostile tools; they are the surface expression of deeper transformations affecting the very structure of political and social systems. In other words — as will be shown later — strategic hybridity is a symptom of a more radical hybridity, one that concerns the complex, non-linear and interdependent nature of the contexts in which such threats emerge²⁸. For this reason, understanding hybrid threats requires a shift in scale: from the operational level of hostile tactics to the structural level of complexity, where hybridity is not a mixture of factors but an *emergent property* of contemporary political and social systems.

Such an inquiry can be carried out effectively within the social and human sciences, which are accustomed to dealing with conceptual resources related to the social and

²⁵ This is what happened, for example, in the case of the rise of European fascisms, as attested by a now consolidated body of literature. See the classic study by E. Nolte, 2018, which interprets fascism as a «counter-movement» to the risks perceived in the rise of Bolshevism; or the monumental study by R. De Felice, 2005, which reads fascism as a movement capable of capitalising on the fear of red subversion and post-war disorder; or again the investigation by E. Gentile, 2011, which interprets fascism as a «political religion» promising security, order and national regeneration.

²⁶ This is a position that, in substance, reflects Mark Galeotti's «adaptive» proposal in Id., 2022.

²⁷ Another matter is a geopolitics that is attuned to complexity in the order of meaning that shapes relations among subjects of international law. Therefore, as Scillitani courageously and effectively emphasises, «Against the “geopolitician” drift, which leads to understanding the world according to coordinates derived from power relations taken as the only reliable points of reference (and rendered almost unquestionable by interpreting foreign policy in the univocal sense of *Machtpolitik*), only a philosophically critical geopolitics, actively and constructively open to a broadening of perspective capable of removing the obstacles that a scepticism disguised as more or less “disenchanted” realism inevitably places in the way of genuine knowledge and understanding of what makes the relations animating the international community something more than mere power relations, can respond effectively: for there is a genuinely political, and certainly also geopolitical, question only if *freedom* is the stake of these relations. In this sense, *law*, and even better, *rights*, and politics, and even better, *democracy*, offer the elective terrain suitable for testing an intentionally and explicitly philosophical geopolitics»; L. Scillitani, 2025, 11, italics in the original.

²⁸ See A. Mumford, P. Carlucci, 2022.

political world in their full depth and breadth, and especially to viewing human beings not as passive statistical objects reduced to a strategic framework²⁹, but as *free, autonomous* and *responsible subjects*, capable of being active participants in the political and social processes³⁰ that shape and animate *communities* — communities that, in concrete terms, constitute the very States concerned with the need for security.

2. For a genealogical reconstruction and a deeper examination of the idea of hybridity

Recently, the idea of *hybridity* has been used with increasing frequency across different fields. Beyond strategic studies, as already noted, it appears — often under different terminological labels — in anthropology³¹, where it is expressed through cultural *métissage*³² and creolization³³; in post-colonial studies³⁴; in science and technology studies³⁵; and, of course, in biology, where the term originates. Yet here we immediately encounter the problem previously outlined: the notion of «hybridity» is rarely employed as a general epistemological category, with the result that «hybrid» tends to function mainly as a descriptive term, unable to sustain the role of a foundational theoretical concept. A security theory built on such a notion risks being constructed on an abstraction that may have many uses but limited epistemological coherence. This makes it necessary to examine more closely the *meaning* concealed beneath the signifier that contains it.

The etymology of the term reveals its ancient origin but also confirms its *ambiguous nature*. The masculine noun appears as a learned Latin word «without clear

²⁹ As Foucault intuited, the modern turn in the art of governing — its departure from the juridical framework of sovereignty — coincides with recognising that the science of government and the problem of the (increasing) population are interconnected. The analytical point of convergence was provided by the development of economic disciplines, more precisely by the refinement of their mathematical and statistical methods of inquiry. See M. Foucault, 2005. At present, one may affirm that strategic studies represent a particularly specialised — but also reductionist, as far as their object is concerned — offshoot of this type of approach. Indeed, the unit of measurement in strategic research remains power, precisely because, as Lawrence Freedman observes, strategy is the art of creating power; see L. Freedman, 2013. If, as Mumford and Carlucci rightly state, strategy «does not have attributes, it only relates to the supremacy of politics» (A. Mumford, P. Carlucci, 2022, 193), then politics — although drastically underestimated by strategic studies — is and remains the primary terrain of the phenomena observed in this genre of research.

³⁰ See H. Arendt, 2015, Cap. II.

³¹ The anthropological field appears to be the most prolific with regard to studies capable of intercepting, at different levels, what has here been defined as hybridity. Consider, for example, the line of research that leads to an exploration of the dimension termed «ontological», concerning a type of hybridisation that brings together and intertwines humans and nature: see J. Clifford, 1997; Ph. Descola, 2005; E. Viveiros de Castro, 2017.

³² See R. Bastide, 1973.

³³ See U. Hannerz, 1992.

³⁴ See especially H. K. Bhabha, 2024.

³⁵ See, from different perspectives, B. Latour, 2018; D. J. Haraway, 2018.

connections»³⁶, although explicitly linked to technical terminology³⁷. It is significant that its use spread in the nineteenth century, «made productive in the main European languages alongside the practice of experiments in the production of hybrids»³⁸ carried out within the natural sciences. The etymology therefore reinforces the uncertain and ambiguous nature of the word — a circumstance that does not, however, prevent its casual use in strategic and geopolitical disciplines, which, for their own purposes, can settle for the mere «semantic shell» of the term, precisely because it simply «reflects» in a mechanical way the *ambiguity* of the strategic and political postures of the actors being observed. But this remains a *metaphorical use* of the notion, one that significantly narrows the range of meaning the concept could offer to an inquiry concerned with the issues and dimensions examined here.

From this brief etymological overview, it becomes clear that hybridity cannot be treated as a simple combination of homogeneous and defined factors, but rather as the *manifestation* — within the semantic field — of *complex phenomena* in which non-linear interactions among an indefinite plurality of elements produce *emergent* and difficult-to-frame effects. It is precisely this dynamic — closer to complex models than to linear causal structures — that makes it necessary, at this point, to turn to *complexity theories* to better illuminate the conceptual resources of the notion under examination.

According to Luhmann, «the concept of complexity designates the possibility of describing the unity (of a system, an environment, the world, etc.) by drawing on the distinction between the elements and the relations of which it is composed»³⁹. What matters in this definition is that the degree of complexity of the unit considered is directly proportional to the possible connections — and therefore the *relations* — among the elements that constitute it.

The idea of a unit of elements conditioned by the types of relations that bind them points to the concept of *system*, which explains why the notion of *complex systems* has gained immediate traction within complexity theories. Indeed, for Morin, a system has two fundamental features: «the first is the interrelation of the elements, and the second is the global unity constituted by these interrelated elements»⁴⁰. In this light, a complex system can be understood as «a system in which numerous interdependent factors are involved in different ways. Think of the millions of billions of proteins, lipids and nucleic acids that, through their interactions, generate a living cell; or the billions of interconnected neurons that form the brain; or the millions of autonomous individuals who constitute the basis of a human society»⁴¹.

³⁶ M. Cortellazzo, P. Zolli, 2019, 545.

³⁷ See *ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ N. Luhmann, 1992, 126.

⁴⁰ E. Morin, 1985, 130.

⁴¹ M. M. Waldrop, 1996, 6.

The fundamental characteristics⁴² of a complex system are: 1) self-organization; 2) adaptation; and 3) chaos.

- 1) Self-organization means that the countless interactions among elements have effects on the structure — that is, on the regularities of the system's dynamics; and this, importantly, occurs in the absence of «a predictable and determinable configuration based on the nature of the units»⁴³.
- 2) Adaptation refers to the fact that a complex system is not closed and/or isolated, but reacts to its surrounding environment in ways that allow it to adjust to certain features of that environment, seeking to turn most external circumstances⁴⁴ to its own advantage.
- 3) Chaos, finally, implies that within a complex system it is impossible «to distinguish disorder from order within the same phenomenon»⁴⁵, because the emerging possibilities the system «screens» fall outside the range of hypotheses that can be exhaustively listed and grounded in observations under controlled, causal conditions.

A deeper examination of these criteria would take us too far from the topic at hand. At this stage, it is enough to keep in mind that the notions of *self-organization*, *adaptation* and *chaos* — developed within sociological theories of complexity — are important because they constitute the first level of clarification and conceptual ordering of the idea of hybridity. They can therefore be considered a conceptual anchor from which to gather more refined and useful insights for rethinking security in the era of complex society and hybrid challenges.

Remaining at an introductory level, what self-organization, adaptation and chaos bring to light is a deeper and more decisive layer of the problem of complexity — one that can be understood through concepts that describe, in the case of a complex phenomenon: a) *the external state or condition* in which a system finds itself; b) *the response* produced by that system; and c) *the logic* of that response. The state can be described as *uncertainty*. The response can be understood as *feedback*. The logic of that response can be described through the notion of *emergence*.

a) *Uncertainty*, elevated to epistemic status by complexity theories, represents a genuine challenge to traditional scientific approaches, especially their more positivistic branches. Complexity can no longer be understood through the logics developed by classical rationality; it cannot be processed through explanations grounded in cause-and-effect relationships, nor approached with predictive criteria inspired by

⁴² See M. Ruzzeddu, 2007, 62.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ See *ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

sylogistic techniques. At the threshold of complexity, the mechanistic view of reality exhausts its hermeneutic capacities and is replaced by models drawn from cybernetics — which is, not coincidentally, one of the scientific «breeding grounds» of these theories⁴⁶. «Complex phenomena [...] present dynamics of change that can hardly be inserted into general laws»⁴⁷; a phenomenon defined as complex «by its nature escapes any simplification that would allow it to be described through one or more “laws”; these are phenomena that do not exhibit the regularities typical of mechanical phenomena, which allow their state to be determined at any future or past moment»⁴⁸. The hybridity that permeates the social and political spheres — especially under conditions of globalization of these processes⁴⁹ — clearly configures these spheres as *complex systems*. Composed of individuals — themselves psychic and biological *systems* — the political and social dimensions are traversed by a complexity that branches out across multiple levels due to technological development, intensified global exchanges and the multiplication of networks of interests. All these processes make one-dimensional readings and rigidly binary, causal logics increasingly ineffective. This is why expressions such as *hybrid warfare* and *hybrid threats* sound contradictory to reason, even while pointing to a reality that logic nonetheless struggles to formulate through conventional models.

b) The response to the phenomena just described must necessarily take on an adaptive, incremental and contextual character. It requires adopting the *logic of feedback*, made an alternative to classical logics by complexity theories. Feedback is a basic principle of cybernetic systems, and it is no surprise that a society increasingly dependent on information technologies might itself adopt the operating models of the devices it creates and uses. As Watzlawick explains, the functioning of feedback consists in the fact that «part of the output data is reintroduced into the system as information about the output itself»⁵⁰, generating stability or change within the system depending on the inputs received.

c) Everything new that uncertainty generates — and that the adaptive, feedback-based response refines — accumulates, as happens when a continuous, thin stream of sand is dropped onto a small pile⁵¹: this produces features of the whole that are difficult to predict and that, from a classical perspective, one might be tempted to label as *disorder* or *chaos*, but that nonetheless follow certain organizational criteria,

⁴⁶ See *ivi*, 44.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ E. Morin, 1985; M. Ceruti, F. Bellusci, 2026.

⁵⁰ P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, 1978, 24.

⁵¹ This is an example proposed by Waldrop in *Id.*, 1996, 490. A type of «disorder» is thus generated — only apparently such — that is, only insofar as the variables from which its structure results are too numerous and too complex to be anticipated deterministically; this is what Waldrop and other scholars define as the «edge of chaos».

although extremely difficult to foresee given the number of variables involved. These features are called *emergent*. According to Waldrop⁵², the liquid state is an example of an *emergent property* — specifically, of water — and one that atomic physics, if it focused solely on its proper objects (the combination of one oxygen atom with two hydrogen atoms), could not grasp, whereas experience can, albeit mostly intuitively. In essence, emergence «is a new characteristic relative to the constituents of the system. It therefore has the status of an *event*, since it arises discontinuously once the system has been constituted; it naturally has the character of irreducibility, a quality that cannot be broken down and cannot be deduced from prior elements»⁵³. Above all, «*emergence constitutes a logical leap*, and opens in our intellect the passage through which the irreducibility of the real enters»⁵⁴. For Edgar Morin, emergence is the true key feature of complex systems⁵⁵. It possesses *organizational qualities* capable of producing a *structural* change of state until the next change occurs. Emergence is also the standard adaptive response of complex systems to their environment — or rather, to the new challenges it poses; it is a response selected by systems because it enables them to preserve themselves and react to the disorientation generated by change. Finally, emergence allows systems to respond to uncertainty actively rather than passively: turning an *impasse* into a stimulus for producing a creative response and generating *new orders*.

If, as Gell-Mann suggests⁵⁶, complexity can be «measured» by the length of the description of a phenomenon, then the phenomena grouped under the label *hybrid* legitimately fall within this interpretive framework. If this is the case, complexity is not merely a heuristic container for heterogeneous contents whose interactions cannot be clearly grasped; it can become an interpretive tool for identifying objective criteria useful for illuminating these relationships and their possible effects.

Following an unusual yet fruitful interplay between sociological, philosophical, computational and biological studies, a paradigm takes shape that suggests responding to uncertainty and chaos through *empirical*, *adaptive* and *flexible logics*. This paradigm is marked by considerable heuristic potential⁵⁷, especially when its interdisciplinary vocation is cultivated. Such an inclination, moreover, seems well suited to the challenges of today's world, which increasingly demand a return to the unity of knowledge⁵⁸ abandoned with the scientific revolution and the subsequent specialist fragmentation of the sciences. As Ruzzeddu writes, «given the “holistic” perspective that characterizes

⁵² See M. M. Waldrop, 1996, 122.

⁵³ E. Morin, 1985, 140, italics in the original.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, italics mine.

⁵⁵ See M. Ruzzeddu, 2007, 52.

⁵⁶ See M. Gell-Mann, 2017.

⁵⁷ See M. Ruzzeddu, 2007, 59.

⁵⁸ The reference is to the various research programmes funded at the European level, such as Horizon Europe, ERC Synergy Grants, Marie Curie Actions (MSCA), or at the national level, such as PRIN Hybrid, PRIN, and the Extended Partnerships under the NRRP.

most complex approaches, it is obvious [...] that attention is paid to issues of global scope, such as the arms race, the economic divide between the Global North and South, and above all environmental degradation»; all these problems require «expertise that goes beyond the academic preparation usually possessed by a single researcher, demanding cooperation not only among specialists in the so-called “hard sciences”, but also among experts capable of addressing socio-economic issues»⁵⁹.

It is therefore possible to affirm that the contribution of complexity theories can be extremely helpful in deepening, examining and organizing the concept of hybridity. If one wishes to respond adequately to the hybrid challenges of the present era, it is necessary to formulate a concept of *security* capable of grasping — and making productive — the complexity concealed behind the hybridity of threats. A complexity which, given the stratification of variables previously observed, now reveals itself not only as material, referring to the visible and measurable manifestations of hybrid challenges, but also as structural, referring to constitutive changes that are not immediately distinguishable and that a hybrid process makes explicit while, at the same time (through *feedback dynamics*), co-producing them within a plurality of systems interacting with one another.

3. Why it is difficult to speak of «security» today

«Types of warfare — argue Mumford and Carlucci — do not redefine war, they synthesise its *complexity* in given circumstances»⁶⁰. Hybrid conduct of conflict (*hybrid warfare*) is simply — through the use of new tools and the emergence of historical phenomena never previously encountered — a return to complexity, a return of what classical war theory had tried — perhaps with excessive confidence in its own means — to make simple, and above all *predictable*, by applying general categories to what happens on the battlefield; and, in doing so, by adopting and interpreting in its own way the rationalism and determinism that shaped the Modern era⁶¹. Complexity makes references to classical theories of war far less effective, and especially the security solutions that followed from them. To frame the concept of security in light of what has been said about complexity, it is necessary to take a step back and widen the field of observation to the structure of international relations among States.

It has become common opinion that the present era is marked by the crisis of grand narratives⁶², but this claim — although not incorrect — is not entirely accurate: it needs to be specified in order to understand its real and significant weight in the context under examination. First, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by «present era» when dealing with issues that place the political sphere and the international system at the forefront.

⁵⁹ M. Ruzzeddu, 2007, 73.

⁶⁰ A. Mumford, P. Carlucci, 2022, 197, italics mine.

⁶¹ See K. von Clausewitz, 2017; C. Schmitt, 2011, Cap. III.

⁶² As emphasised in Daniel A. Bell's celebrated book *The End of Ideology*. See Id., 1991.

From this analysis, the grand narrative in crisis will emerge almost spontaneously, and from there it will be possible to proceed toward an interpretation that reintegrates complexity as a foundational element for rethinking security within a political and international framework that has undergone profound transformation.

Generally, historiography places the beginning of the contemporary era between 1789 and 1815⁶³, but the twentieth century introduced further major historical discontinuities. Excluding the ruptures highlighted at the beginning of this brief study — still too recent and «magmatic» to be considered definitive breaks — one can say that an intermediate phase of disruption within contemporaneity can be identified in what scholars of international relations call *the unipolar moment*⁶⁴. Following the predominance of the United States in its competition with the USSR, this moment was marked by exceptional confidence in the progressive «expansion and, prospectively, [...] universalization of markets and democracy» and in the «lack of viable alternatives to liberal democracy»⁶⁵. Today, however, the emergence of new actors claiming agency on the international stage — alongside the gradual decline of the hegemonic power — has pushed this structure into crisis, opening the way to a new distribution of power according to a multipolar, or multi-nodal, logic.

What do these shifts in historical phase and global governance imply for security threats and for the security of the actors that populate the international landscape? To understand this, it is necessary to examine the security structure that the architects of the unipolar moment had defined on the basis of the ideological and factual premises characterizing that phase. The unipolar moment had, in fact, dismantled an architecture inherited from the post-1945 bipolar era dominated by the USA and the USSR — an architecture resting on three pillars which, one might say, constituted the response to three questions inherent to the «security question»⁶⁶: A) who?; B) how?; C) where?.

A) First, *the subject*: the State, as the sole referent of security at the international level. When one spoke of security, the reference was to the integrity and survival of the State — not to other political or institutional actors.

B) Second, this model of security rested on an action paradigm centered on the idea of *reciprocity*. In other words, security was conceived as a *shared need* among the actors populating the international system, and therefore — although potentially contradictory and often conflicting — these needs were implicitly considered *all* rationally legitimate. If

⁶³ Historians' positions on these two dates as possible caesuras between modern and contemporary history are not unanimous; nevertheless, one may speak of a long transition — between the French Revolution and the Congress of Vienna — as a phase of gestation of the contemporaneity in which we are still situated.

⁶⁴ The expression was coined by Charles Krauthammer in a celebrated 1990 article; see Id., 1990.

⁶⁵ A. Colombo, 2022, IX.

⁶⁶ For the analyses that follow, I am indebted to Alessandro Colombo's illuminating research, presented in various seminars and conferences over recent years and partly collected in A. Colombo, 2022. For the themes addressed in what follows, see in particular Chapters 1 and 2.

this was the premise, it follows that the clash between such claims had to be addressed through rational means (politics and diplomacy, within the boundaries of law), rather than through the ordeal of war. This also implied, quite evidently, that all actors in the system not only conceived of themselves *as rational*, but recognized such rationality in their adversaries as well (the emblematic case being the uninterrupted relations between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War). As rational actors, they were capable of expressing themselves and understanding one another on the basis of a *shared language* (and a stable predisposition toward communication), even in circumstances of acute deterioration of relations, as shown by the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Hence, the idea of security developed between 1945 and 1989 was *relational in nature*.

C) Finally, *the space* in which the international system took shape was understood as a *full space* — that is, defined by the territoriality of all the actors populating the system. This implied a type of «zero-sum» reciprocity: an expansion of the political and military sphere of influence of one actor did not occur in a vacuum, but translated into the occupation of a space already filled by another actor's influence, and to the detriment of that actor's legitimate security aspirations⁶⁷.

After 1990, with the beginning of the *unipolar phase*, this relational model of security was set aside⁶⁸. The predominance of the United States in the Cold War implied the loss of the *principal unit or parameter of measurement* (its historical adversary) within the framework of strategic reciprocity, and consequently also a loss of *measure* in managing its international role⁶⁹. This fueled a form of arrogance that emerged not only in political action but also in the theoretical interpretation of that historical shift, as shown by Francis Fukuyama's famous analysis⁷⁰. The «end of history» is the achievement of the teleological endpoint of humanity's long and troubled journey toward freedom and democracy, and thus coincides with the progressive, uninterrupted and residue-free universalization of the liberal-democratic model. Everything that resists (religions, collective identities, other legal and political cultures⁷¹) can be considered an undue and unacceptable stagnation in anachronism⁷², judged — through a moralizing reading typical

⁶⁷ The case of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis remains emblematic in this regard: the United States judged the placement of Soviet weapons systems on the Caribbean island as an unacceptable intrusion into its sphere of influence, thereby ignoring — on the basis of that principle — Cuba's legitimate claims to strategic autonomy. The outcome of that episode attested to the Soviet Union's substantial recognition of the logic of spheres of influence, to the detriment of the claims to strategic autonomy or the «political kinships» that might be invoked by smaller international actors.

⁶⁸ See again A. Colombo, 2022.

⁶⁹ The «eclipse» of the Other has favoured the disappearance of the ontological conditions that would allow a third element (the juridical) to emerge as an institutional point of convergence for the two subjects placed in a relation of reciprocity. See M. Hénaff, 2018, Chap. VIII; P. Ricoeur, 1995, 34.

⁷⁰ F. Fukuyama, 2020.

⁷¹ On this point, see J. Mearsheimer, 2018.

⁷² See A. Colombo, 2022, 14-15.

of liberalism — as hostile, even «evil», because intrinsically and irreducibly *different*⁷³. Outside the «liberal ecumene» there can be no plurality, but only the frontier toward which a stubborn effort to universalize one's own paradigm is directed⁷⁴.

If history has ended and the last man (the only one now entitled to speak) is the liberal man, all entities that — especially, though not exclusively, on the international stage — linger on conservative positions are no longer subjects but objects of the «liberal catechesis», and if they persist in the «heresy»⁷⁵ of their convictions, they «unveil» themselves as «malignant» elements, hostile and, as such, *natural generators of threats* to the security of «democracies». If the world ceases to be a *complex system* composed of a plurality of actors and becomes a one-dimensional (liberal) cosmopolis⁷⁶, and if the liberal paradigm is understood through a radically universalistic perspective — and thus its triumph *must* coincide with its full affirmation in every remaining political-cultural horizon tied to tradition — space ceases to be «full» and becomes a «void» to be filled, a frontier to be pursued, a *res nullius* to be occupied by virtue of a destiny-laden commitment that transcends politics and connects with forms of proselytism and messianic interpretations of religion⁷⁷. Forms of resistance, being backward and/or malignant, cannot be considered *rational*. The enemy is «evil», or at best «mad»; in any case, no longer and never again an interlocutor. If this is so, entities claiming independence from the hegemonic model cease to be considered part of a relationship of communication and *reciprocity*; their discourse is no longer audible (those who listen place themselves at their level, and thus outside the perimeter of the legitimate community: they become «internal enemies»), and likewise, no reply must be given to them in any form.

Starting from such a posture, the step toward demonizing (*dehumanizing*) the adversary is short. Any treatment toward them — provided it is oriented toward their total annihilation as a foreign body — becomes legitimate, and is labeled with grotesque yet revealing expressions such as «international police operations», certainly no longer under the ethically and legally demanding category of «war». The fight against terrorism, for example, cannot and must not have legal limits, not even those of humanitarian law, as shown by the torture and detention camps of the early 2000s, as well as the far more

⁷³ It is due to structural conditions that this conception struggles to recognise pluralism externally, having believed the problem of pluralism to be «resolved» by incorporating it as an internal model of functioning. See Robert A. Dahl, 2002.

⁷⁴ On this theme, see the illuminating reflection — unfolding across the theories of Schmitt, Rawls, Habermas, and Wittgenstein — offered by Chantal Mouffe in Id., 2024.

⁷⁵ On the analogy between liberal discourse and religious discourse, I refer the reader to I. Cucco, 2025, 127–165.

⁷⁶ See A. Colombo, 2022.

⁷⁷ This is the logic — foundational for the United States — of the «frontier» as a form of space-cultural resistance that must be conquered and occupied; here, it becomes fatally intertwined with the universalising logic of liberal ideology. On this point, the analogy between post-1989 liberal ideology and the evangelisation of the New Lands — which the present author has sought to elucidate in I. Cucco, 2025, Part II, Chap. 2 — remains, in my view, a fruitful one.

explicit genocidal practices carried out today. If the Other has no right to speak, to oppose its religious, political or cultural claims to the liquid post-modernism⁷⁸ proposed (or imposed?) by the neo-liberalism of the new millennium, it means that it has — cannot have, nor claim — any entitlement to *security*. Security becomes a right accessible not through ontological criteria (belonging to a shared international subjectivity), but through adherence to the so-called «international community» (the G7).

Symmetrically — and *paradoxically* — the security needs of the hegemonic entity and its allies do not diminish; rather, they radicalize, because within the illusory framework drawn by such an ideology, everything that moves in a misaligned or contrary direction (that is, most of reality, which psychoanalytically always resists paranoid forms⁷⁹) participates in the proliferation of threats, and indeed generates them, as increasingly suggested by various NATO documents since the 1990s⁸⁰. Threats not only multiply, but fragment and become diffuse. The very notion of threat (derived from military jargon) comes to coincide — problematically and dangerously — with that of *risk*, which by nature is aleatory and unpredictable, because ontologically tied to human existence itself, which is a wager of life and exposed to every kind of danger from the moment it appears⁸¹.

The current condition — marking the transition of the international system from the *unipolar moment* to a *multipolar turn* — brings to the surface the unresolved contradictions of the liberalism that emerged victorious from its confrontation with the Soviet model. In this way, international liberalism becomes the last of the *great ideologies* enter in crisis, and its failure is the paradoxical result of an internal short-circuit generated by its external triumph. Specific exogenous factors have certainly contributed to this crisis. The *complexity* of today's world is unreadable when viewed through the still overly modern grids of nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberalism. This is why the hybridity of threats is so unsettling: because these challenges are approached with obsolete conceptual tools inherited from an era in which war was still conceived as a «great duel» between equals, and these tools were transplanted onto a terrain where the victorious ideology sought to «over-win» by replacing the principle of reality, believing that Others no longer existed — and therefore that *iusti hostes* no longer existed.

If hybridity is nothing more than a more or less accurate conceptualization of the *uncertainty* or *ambiguity* that characterizes the present transitional moment, it is

⁷⁸ See the celebrated analysis of late modernity developed by Zygmunt Bauman may be consulted in Id., 2011.

⁷⁹ In psychoanalysis, the persecutor/persecuted reversal is a typical feature of paranoid delusions. In this framework, reality — which resists the patient's self-narration — is not bypassed or denied, but absorbed into a counter-narrative that uses the body as a psychosomatic vector capable of providing confirmations, in the form of symptoms, to the delusional construction. See S. Freud, 2018, particularly 384–386. The fruitful application of psychoanalytic interpretive models to politics is owed, in particular, to the Frankfurt School; among the many contributions, see especially M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno, 2010.

⁸⁰ See A. Colombo, 2022, Cap. 2.

⁸¹ See the illuminating anthropological-philosophical analysis developed by Arnold Gehlen in Id., 2010.

unsurprising that, as Mumford and Carlucci rightly note, «there is a lack of specific literature on ambiguity in warfare»⁸², because «academia has concentrated its attention on the characteristics of its conduct rather than its essence and why it is fought»⁸³. When discussing hybrid warfare, we should ask why it exists — that is, in response to which structural conditions — rather than how it manifests⁸⁴. Hybridity is simply the form of the era in which it appears. Likewise, so-called hybrid war is the military-level manifestation of transformation processes that are affecting, first and foremost, the *structure* of international relations and, as will be seen shortly, also the forms of political organization of the actors inhabiting the global context. As *structural processes*, they are not induced transformations — or only minimally so. Given the scale at which they are unfolding, they are difficult to govern; this would be possible only through coordinated action, which would require a level of consensus and cooperation that the international system currently does not exhibit.

As Mumford and Carlucci have intuited, major changes in the international order have always had an effect on the character of war⁸⁵: hybrid warfare suggests that the *structural shifts* we are dealing with remove *symmetry*, *linearity* and *clarity* from what reflects them on the surface of power relations — namely, the way conflicts are conducted. But to understand hybrid war in depth, one must penetrate the structural transformations of which these new forms of conflict are an expression. And in this context, as complexity theories have long shown, chaos is only *apparent disorder*; in reality, it is an *emergent order* that does not stand out to those accustomed to older geometries. Failing to recognize the criteria and trends of this *new order* can be fatal, because it cuts us off from the *field of possibilities* that complexity (uncertainty⁸⁶ or ambiguity⁸⁷) opens up — possibilities in which it would be advisable to act in order to shape better conditions in the new phase, following an *adaptive approach*. Disorder is an order not yet recognizable because subject to too many variables; the point is not to focus attention on disorder, but to engage with the variables that its chaos conceals, in order to try to control at least those that, for now, appear «governable».

In light of this, it becomes possible to take a step forward and attempt to outline a new paradigm of security that takes into account the many premises examined here in summary form and, above all, their structural interrelation.

⁸² A. Mumford, P. Carlucci, 2022, 198.

⁸³ Ivi, 205.

⁸⁴ Ivi, 197.

⁸⁵ Ivi, 194.

⁸⁶ See M. Ruzzeddu, 2007.

⁸⁷ See A. Mumford, P. Carlucci, 2022.

4. The search for a new security paradigm

The critical issues that have accumulated around the concept of security in recent years, highlighted in the previous section, should not lead too hastily to the conclusion that the topic ought to be discarded. Security, rather, needs to be rethought. More than ever, there is a need for a *new security paradigm* capable of holding together these new demands without overlooking the ideological limits and historical framework in which they developed, nor neglecting the ambiguous and still «fluid» morphology of the current international system. And without underestimating the complexity generated by the increasingly tight interweaving of information networks and computational networks, of the different epistemic levels through which today's reality becomes legible, and of the new technologies and individuals who are ever more intertwined and interconnected with them — making State territorial boundaries increasingly uncertain and porous.

If hybridity is the surface imprint of the *complexity* that characterizes our era, this new paradigm — in order to be truly effective against real threats — must be able to incorporate such hybridization; more precisely, it must be able to *express* this hybridization. In light of all this, I will call this new paradigm *Hybrid Security*.

Hybrid Security is a cognitive paradigm⁸⁸ that describes the co-production of security⁸⁹ by human, institutional, technological and informational actors operating within complex ecologies⁹⁰ where distinctions between internal/external, civilian/military, human/non-human, natural/artificial are structurally blended.

However, to be solidly grounded, this paradigm requires clarifying who the contemporary referent of security is when security is rethought in these terms. As seen above, theorists of international relations assign to the State — on the basis of well-established historical references — a precise role: that of the *sole subject* (both active and passive) of security. In other words, on the one hand, it is the State that must respond to the demand for security; on the other, it is the survival and integrity of the State that a security architecture aims to protect. Without clarifying who the current referent of security is, there is a risk that security becomes a value in itself; and when, in the realm of life — which is by nature unpredictable — «security becomes a value and an objective in itself, to which practically everything else must be sacrificed»⁹¹, the endpoint

⁸⁸ It is not a technique, nor a protocol, nor an apparatus. It is *a way of thinking* about security in the contemporary world.

⁸⁹ Security is no longer produced by a single actor (the state, the army, the police). It is generated by: individuals, institutions, digital platforms, AI, media, informational networks, non-state actors, technical infrastructures. This is the core of the hybrid: no one produces security alone.

⁹⁰ Security no longer unfolds in a linear environment, but within: informational ecosystems, digital environments, socio-technical networks, transforming geopolitical contexts, sensitive cognitive spaces.

⁹¹ A. Colombo, 2022, 90.

is «a society that ends up in the hands of those who manage, or claim to manage, risks»⁹², that is, a paranoid and panoptic State, if not explicitly totalitarian.

Now, however, an obstacle immediately appears. The most significant political fact — and perhaps not yet sufficiently examined — of recent years is the surprising erosion of State sovereignty occurring on multiple fronts (supranational organizations, strategic alliances, financial markets). This erosion suggests less a planned strategy or an alternative design than a natural obsolescence of this historical figure — made manifest precisely in a conjuncture in which historical, social, economic and technological forces emerge that are, at first glance, incompatible with it. Whatever the causes, what matters here — from the perspective of rethinking security — is that this process undermines the State's role as the sole referent of security in the international arena. The State is now forced to share its former primacy within the global ecosystem with various emerging non-state actors (large financial conglomerates, multinational corporations, cosmopolitan oligarchs, NGOs, sub-state communities, etc.). Moreover, the State faces an additional front of attack on its sovereignty: the moral one, made explicit by the trampling (and thus the fatal loss of effectiveness) of the legal principles of international law and humanitarian law of which it had, commendably, been both the historical laboratory and the natural guarantor.

Since Hybrid Security is a co-produced endeavor involving actors only partly attributable to the State, this new paradigm implicitly requires asking who, ultimately, must today be considered its *real*, fundamental referent. Automatically identifying this subject in supranational entities (such as the EU), to which the State has transferred part of its sovereignty in recent years, may seem sensible from a formal standpoint, but proves to be merely a shortcut from a logical standpoint, because it leaves unanswered the basic question: *who, in reality*, is intended to be protected when security competences are attributed — in whole or in part — to the European Union? The *who* demands the identification of a real subject, not the deferral to other abstract entities.

The answer can be inferred by taking a long step back and examining what Hobbes had in mind when he shaped the conceptual foundations of the political and legal organization whose crisis and decline we are witnessing today.

«The final cause, end, or design of *men* (who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in Commonwealths [the current States], is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war which is necessarily consequent, as hath been shown, to the natural passions of men when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their *covenants*»⁹³.

⁹² Ivi, 91.

⁹³ Th. Hobbes, 1660, 117, italics mine.

«And *covenants*, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all. Therefore, notwithstanding the laws of nature [...], if there be no power erected, or not great enough *for our security*, every man will and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art for caution against all other men»⁹⁴.

It is precisely on these premises that the Leviathan — that is, the State — comes into being. It arises from a *natural* human need to guarantee one's *own preservation* and the *more contented life thereby*. The Leviathan, «called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin, CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural [men], for whose protection and defence it was intended»⁹⁵; in it, «the sovereignty is an artificial soul»⁹⁶. Sovereignty — *absolute and perpetual power*, as defined by its modern rediscoverer⁹⁷, Jean Bodin⁹⁸ — belongs to the State by virtue of a logical artifice, one of the many produced by modern politics⁹⁹, which was forced to compensate for the obliteration of the transcendent plane as a source of justification and legitimacy for authority¹⁰⁰.

In the era of the centrality of the individual and of human rights — although the latter have been blatantly and widely betrayed and trampled — we know with certainty that this absolute and perpetual power belongs to *the men and women* who constitute the *demos*, the *living* and *real* element of the abstract entity called «State». These individuals — the citizens, or the people — merely delegate this power to organs and institutions through various institutional and procedural artifices developed by political rationality. It is not the State that is free (Hegel¹⁰¹), but the citizens, and by nature¹⁰²; they are the ones who *actually* experience such freedom (or its limitation, or absence) in their *concrete existence*. It is not the State that must ensure its own freedom, that must be *secure*, but the *demos* that resides concretely within its territory and is subject to its delegated sovereignty — bearing in mind that such security, as history repeatedly teaches, has often been seized or undermined by the State itself. And here another aspect of the issue arises, confirming — so to speak, «from the opposite side» — what has just been observed.

The doctrine of the *right of resistance*, which grants the people the faculty to rebel against a sovereign who has broken the political pact, implicitly but clearly attests where

⁹⁴ Ivi, 118, italics mine.

⁹⁵ Ivi, 7, capital letters in the text. «To describe the nature of this artificial man, I will consider * First, the matter thereof, and the artificer; both which is man», ivi, 8.

⁹⁶ Ivi, 7.

⁹⁷ See M. Cortellazzo, P. Zolli, 2019, 1219.

⁹⁸ Cfr. J. Bodin, 1577, 89.

⁹⁹ The reference is, above all and quite obviously, to the notion of representation.

¹⁰⁰ See C. Schmitt, 2013.

¹⁰¹ Hegel completely overturns the contractualist conception — with particular insistence on Rousseau's positions — arguing, in essence, that it is not individuals who form the State, but the State that forms individuals. The current, likely irreversible, crisis of the State-form in the face of a maximum of individual consciousness would require a thorough reflection on this point of view. See G.W.F. Hegel, 2025.

¹⁰² See J. Locke, 1980.

sovereignty truly resides. A significantly long intellectual tradition — stretching from Thomas Aquinas¹⁰³ to John Locke¹⁰⁴, from Hannah Arendt¹⁰⁵ to Ronald Dworkin¹⁰⁶, to mention only the most well-known authors in political philosophy — demonstrates that *the people* are the central subject of every republican political constitution, and therefore *the real referent* of the security that *the pact* is meant to guarantee.

It is thus *democratic sovereignty* — the absolute and perpetual power of the *demos*, the «political soul» (Hobbes) of the people — that is deserving of protection within a hybrid security paradigm.

Since Hybrid Security is a cognitive paradigm, it must concretely be able to protect the integrity of the principal instrument available to citizens for expressing their democratic citizenship freely and fully: thought. More precisely: *critical thought* — that is, autonomy of judgment and the means devoted to developing and strengthening it within the political horizon. What distinguishes a democratic regime from an autocratic or explicitly tyrannical one is precisely the possibility citizens have to participate, within the public sphere¹⁰⁷, in the formation of political debate. The instruments are well known and correspond to those liberal rights that we may call *cognitive freedoms*: freedom of the press, freedom of thought, freedom of opinion, freedom of research, freedom of communication and correspondence. This possibility is not an ornamental element of the liberal-democratic order, but a substantive one, because the critical gaze of the *demos* is an essential component of the complex political-institutional apparatus responsible for selecting and renewing the ruling class — which is the structural logic of the *democratic procedure*. In other words, a democracy in which cognitive freedoms lack adequate protection opens a breach toward oligarchy, toward the arbitrariness (and advantage) of *the few* at the expense of *the many*.

If hybrid threats strike at the cognitive infrastructures of democratic societies — information ecosystems, public opinion, deliberative processes — then security can no longer be conceived as mere technical or military protection. It becomes the capacity to

¹⁰³ In the *De regno ad regem Cypri* (1, 7) we read: «First of all, if it falls within the right of any multitude to provide for a king, then the king appointed by that same body can justly be deposed or his power restrained if he abuses the royal authority tyrannically. Nor should such a multitude be thought to act unfaithfully in deposing a tyrant, even if it had submitted itself to him forever: for he himself brought it upon himself by not governing faithfully in the people's rule as the office of a king demands, and because the pact of the subjects was not kept for him»; see Th. Aquinas, 1954.

¹⁰⁴ «Wherefore if the king shall shew an hatred, not only to some particular persons, but sets himself against the body of the commonwealth, whereof he is the head, and shall, with intolerable ill usage, cruelly tyrannize over the whole, or a considerable part of the people, in this case the people have a right to resist and defend themselves from injury»; J. Locke, 1980, 48 (see Chap. XIX, Sect. 233).

¹⁰⁵ Arendt, who frames the people's right to resist an unjust government in terms of civil disobedience, maintains that it becomes an option when citizens realise that «the usual channels of change no longer work, that their complaints are no longer being heard or acted upon, or, conversely, that the government is changing and is directed toward, or already embarked upon, conduct of doubtful constitutionality and legality»; H. Arendt, 2017, 29.

¹⁰⁶ See R. Dworkin, 1977, 206 ff.

¹⁰⁷ See J. Habermas, 2005.

preserve the integrity of these infrastructures without compromising their free, pluralistic and open nature. From this perspective, Hybrid Security is not a fortification erected against an «enemy», but the *security of the conditions* that make democracy possible, and that make it rationally and objectively preferable to any alternative. Protecting cognitive infrastructures therefore means defending freedom of thought, expression and information, ensuring that the response to hybrid threats does not produce effects more damaging than the threats themselves.

Within the context of cognitive freedoms, the theme of *truth* assumes particular importance. The reliability of information is crucial, for in an increasingly media-driven and information-saturated society, such information constitutes the material upon which public opinion forms its judgment — a judgment that, through specific democratic mechanisms, translates into political action (consent/dissent, forms of mobilization, voting, etc.). The protection of *substantive truth*¹⁰⁸, and of the democratic debate that gathers, examines and discusses it, must be considered a priority, because the *Agora* (which does not coincide immediately with parliament, but rather with the space of public discussion¹⁰⁹) is the place that truly contains the «spirit» of democracy¹¹⁰.

Truth is therefore a *right* of the *demos*, and among the most fundamental: at least as important as suffrage, since it is a clear view of the objectivity of facts that makes voting conscious, and thus *fully* exercised as an expression of *civic duty*¹¹¹. Within the framework of complexity previously reconstructed, the need for truth belongs fully to the category of *emergent phenomena* that develop at the intersection of processes situated on different planes — in this case: the cognitive plane of democratic freedoms; the security-military plane of pressure exerted on governments and societies by hybrid threats; the political level constituted by the complex relationship between State survival and democratic sovereignty; and the international plane marked by a power transition of epochal significance. Therefore, there are sufficient grounds to advance the idea that the *right to truth* may be considered an *emergent right*¹¹², situated at the intersection of the demands for transparency, informational accuracy and protection against manipulation.

¹⁰⁸ The definition contained in Article 2 of Law 69/1963, which established the Italian Order of Journalists (OdG), offers, in the present author's view, a highly fruitful notion of truth applicable to the delicate context of journalistic activity — an activity essential to a healthy democracy. This concept, surprisingly neglected, would merit far greater space for reflection and study, including within journalistic practice itself.

¹⁰⁹ See J. Habermas, 2005.

¹¹⁰ See H. Arendt, 2015.

¹¹¹ The reference is to Article 48 of the Italian Constitution.

¹¹² By «emerging rights» I mean those rights that are not yet fully typified but are taking shape as responses to transformations arising from the complexity that characterises the present age: technological, social, and epistemic transformations. To be considered *emerging*, these needs for protection must not yet be codified — that is, they do not yet exist as positive norms, but only as *normative demands*. Nonetheless, they appear to be in the process of consolidation: for example, they already surface in soft law, guidelines, and doctrinal debates. Finally, they constitute a (possible) response of the legal sphere to new risks, arising because traditional rights are no longer sufficient to withstand the pressures exerted by social reality on the legal order (as in the cases of privacy, autonomy, information, and, more recently, artificial intelligence). From the standpoint of literature and doctrine, one may further note the coherence of the category of

But the protection of truth is an extremely slippery terrain, especially in contexts directly or indirectly affected by conflict, where confrontation ceases to be a clash between different rational perspectives on the same objective reality and becomes instead a struggle between opposing ideologies — and therefore between opposing forms of propaganda¹¹³. Hybrid Security is not security in the traditional sense; it is not merely a military problem. It points to issues that are primarily political and cognitive. It therefore cannot be entirely delegated to military, police or surveillance apparatuses, as happens with security conceived in traditional terms. These levels are only one component — and not even the primary one — of the mosaic of complexity, that is, of the multilayered processes that a *hybrid* model of security is called upon to decipher and, insofar as possible, govern for the purposes previously outlined. For these reasons, Hybrid Security must be subjected to *strict epistemic oversight*, the only barrier against falsification and contamination of public debate in contexts where the press is no longer able to guarantee the objectivity of circulating information, given its increasing entanglement with political power.

It is therefore possible to add that Hybrid Security is an *epistemic paradigm* as well as a cognitive one — indeed, this further characterization is a logical consequence of the first. It is grounded in the principle of *responsibility*, which binds every security intervention to the protection of the cognitive vulnerabilities of the political subject (the *demos*) that underpins democracy. In a political context, responsibility is *accountability*: that is, giving an account of one's decisions/actions and assuming their moral and legal consequences. This constraint implies that, in the effort to guarantee such security, every decision must be clearly attributable, every intervention fully justifiable, every technology assessed in terms of its effects *on human beings*, every protocol legitimized (and at multiple levels, in institutional contexts that are heavily worn and under pressure, as contemporary democracies are); finally, every actor must answer for the consequences they produce. Responsibility is the epistemic limit that prevents security needs from turning into technocratic drift (and thus into formally and substantively non-democratic regimes).

Think tanks, military agencies, government apparatuses and private NGOs cannot be entrusted with *responsibility* for overseeing security aimed at protecting democratic sovereignty, given the inevitable suspicion of private interests that hangs over these

emerging rights with at least three lines of development still in formation: digital rights (right to be forgotten, right to data portability, etc., all born as responses to new problems); informational rights (quality of information, algorithmic transparency, non-manipulation); and «contemporary» rights such as the right to the protection of digital identity. Within this framework, truth emerges, on the one hand, as a public good, insofar as the quality of information is a condition for the functioning of democracy; and, on the other, as a subjective right, insofar as individuals are entitled to non-deceptive information when they consume media content or interact with technological and digital devices (e.g., AI, chatbots, etc.). This implies obligations of disclosure, explainability, and accountability on the part of those responsible for such content.

¹¹³ Propaganda is, in fact, not a tool employed solely by non-democratic regimes. See L. Cedroni, 2014.

bodies. Hybrid Security — also in light of the complexity generated by the interweaving of the various epistemic levels involved — must be entrusted primarily to the epistemic oversight of the sciences familiar with the domains implicated by the challenges to democratic sovereignty. In this regard, interdisciplinary collaboration between STEM scholars and humanities scholars is desirable, since it is precisely the hybridization of the planes investigated by these fields that yields the particular form of complexity characterizing the present era. For example, only a political anthropologist, appropriately supported by studies in quantitative economics, can reliably determine whether the posture of the People's Republic of China toward Africa is part of a «hybrid strategy» employing the so-called «debt trap»¹¹⁴, or whether it is instead the direct consequence of an attitude consistent with a cultural model grounded in the primacy of commerce and the idea that cooperation and mutual benefit lead to widespread prosperity and better international reputation (and thus better political and commercial relations) than a model based on assertiveness and unilateral sanctioning.

A military research center gathers intelligence — often valuable, comparable to genuine ethnographic reports produced in the field¹¹⁵ — at best to define a strategy within the limits of the binary filter that underpins the strategic approach (friend/enemy), and at worst to lend a degree of credibility or confirmation to pre-packaged theses useful for diverting public funding toward voracious military-industrial complexes. But a research group that includes, for example, anthropologists, linguists, computer scientists, sociologists and philosophers has a better chance of transforming that information into more articulated, more accurate, more objective — and therefore more reliable — outputs for ensuring effective democratic security within the framework of global complexity.

¹¹⁴ The narrative of the «debt trap» constitutes a paradigmatic example of *fake news*, for it displays the typical features of repetition and «viral» dissemination of an apodictic assertion that is neither verified nor easily verifiable. It rests on a crude and reductive reading of Chinese international policy — widespread in Western circles hostile to the Asian country — yet contradicted by careful studies, including American ones. A meticulous debunking of Chinese *debt-trap diplomacy* comes from the Johns Hopkins University – School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), particularly from the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) directed by Deborah Brautigam, one of the world's leading experts on the subject. Several studies published at SAIS–Johns Hopkins empirically dismantle the «debt trap» narrative; see, for example, D. Brautigam, W. Kidane, 2020; K. Acker, D. Brautigam, Y. Huang, 2020; D. Brautigam, Y. Huang, 2021. Moreover, one would need to explain why a debt contracted with the People's Republic of China should constitute a «trap» any more than a debt contracted with the International Monetary Fund. Given its repeated use — especially in mass-media outlets, and even by institutional figures and intellectuals — the «debt trap» narrative can undoubtedly be classified as a refined, textbook example of Euro-Atlantic production of *hybrid cognitive warfare*.

¹¹⁵ It is no coincidence that — as is widely known and demonstrated in anthropology — colonial powers encouraged and often financed the expeditions of the early pioneers of ethnological disciplines into the inhabited yet still unexplored regions of the territories they occupied.

5. Conclusions

Today, the European security ecosystem is under scrutiny, as it is believed to be traversed by threats capable of combining military, economic, informational and technological tools that act simultaneously on the levels of data, meanings and strategic postures. This multidimensionality renders sector-specific responses ineffective and reveals a vulnerability that is, above all, *cognitive*. The European Union possesses substantial resources and many instruments suited to addressing conventional security challenges, but it still lacks a model capable of responding to so-called hybrid threats. What is perceived as missing in this historical moment does not concern the military apparatus as such, but rather a model capable of integrating, within a unified framework, advanced technical, interpretive and computational knowledge. From this arises an *epistemic vulnerability* that limits the ability to understand, interpret and potentially anticipate risks to cognitive freedoms that may form within communicative circuits, digital spaces and symbolic arenas — a deficiency that cannot be remedied by diverting resources toward conventional military investments.

This void, moreover, can easily be exploited by technocracies and authoritarian tendencies within the Union itself, which — instead of protecting democracy — may act under the pretext of emergency to further restrict its fragile and already frayed natural boundaries. For these reasons, given the combination of external and internal threats to which European democracies are currently exposed, the need to rethink the notion of security is a topic that must be addressed with clarity and foresight.

Now, the AI Act, European policies on «information resilience», and, more generally, the growing attention to cognitive security¹¹⁶ show that the protection of cognitive infrastructures is becoming an increasingly central political and strategic priority in Europe. However, both at the national and at the EU level, action continues to be guided by approaches that are unclear in their aims and fragmented, largely governed by strategic-military logics — thus failing to fully grasp the complexity that characterizes the transitional phase we are in, the technologies that will gradually become available, and the emerging claims of citizenship within democracies undergoing crisis or transformation; a complexity that, as we have seen, is reflected in the threats themselves.

The result is a misaligned decision-making ecosystem in which data, contexts and narratives do not converge into a coherent and homogeneous response model, leaving the decision-making output fatally to the sector which, within the classical institutional framework, is the only one formally entitled to address «threats» to the system: the military apparatus. Yet *hybrid threats* challenge the military apparatus as well, which is

¹¹⁶ The reference is to the recent measures, both of the European Parliament and of certain EU Member States, concerning the monitoring of citizens' private chats (the controversial chat-control) and the restrictions on access to social networks based on users' age.

itself now seeking non-conventional resources to adequately interpret such phenomena¹¹⁷. In short, the absence of a device capable of interpreting systems of meaning, cultural postures, perceptual dynamics, and political and social transformations represents one of the main vulnerabilities of the European Union today, which finds itself unable to clearly observe the changes occurring within and beyond its borders.

To confront challenges that act simultaneously on the informational, symbolic, political and cultural planes, Europe would need an interdisciplinary security model that brings together, for example, the humanities and STEM disciplines — with particular attention to cybernetics and computer science — capable of fostering a connection between interpretation and computation, qualitative analysis and technological resilience, and strictly subject to epistemic guidance and responsibility guaranteed by the scientific community, rather than ceded to exclusive political control, let alone technocratic control.

The European strategic and regulatory framework — from the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*¹¹⁸ to the *AI Act*¹¹⁹, from *NIS2*¹²⁰ to the *Defence of Democracy Package*¹²¹ — acknowledges the need to integrate technical and cognitive dimensions not only for security reasons but also for the sake of healthy development. It does not, however, offer an operational model for doing so. The gap is *conceptual*: what is missing is a theoretical device capable of connecting systems of meaning, epistemic criteria and strategic postures within an analytical framework able to distinguish, for example, concrete threats from false signals and, where necessary, to read real threats simultaneously across informational, symbolic, perceptual, political and strategic planes.

Such a cognitive model can only arise from an outlook capable of integrating the strategic-military plane with the broader historical, cultural, legal and international-political framework. It should be capable of using *uncertainty* as a terrain for developing new postures, rather than interpreting it as *nonsense* or *epistemic void*, and of mobilizing its cognitive resources in a *feedback logic* in response to *emergent phenomena*. In this way, Hybrid Security — proposed as the guiding idea of this model — instead of being merely a «trendy» label applied to an old tool (a security device in the traditional sense, rendered unusable because the object for which it was designed — the State — is now in a condition of obsolescence), becomes a tool that *hybridizes* with the emergent phenomenon it seeks to address, producing in turn *emergent forms* — in this specific case: *emergent rights* referring to the new (indeed, true and original) referent of security in a democratic context: the sovereignty of the people.

¹¹⁷ See Stato Maggiore della Difesa, 2023.

¹¹⁸ See Council of the European Union, 2022.

¹¹⁹ See European Union, 2024.

¹²⁰ See European Union, 2022.

¹²¹ See European Commission, 2020.

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