

# Fighting to be God: A Bourdieusian critique of the challenge of humanitarian disarmament to the State

Luchando por ser Dios: una crítica bourdieusiana al desafío del desarme humanitario al Estado

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the epistemic and critical potential of the Bourdieusian notion of the State as a dual monopoly of legitimised physical and symbolic violence. Despite growing use of Bourdieu's sociological theory in International Relations over the past two decades, this notion remains underexplored in a highly relevant area: the analysis of humanitarian disarmament. It is precisely this notion, I argue, that enables a more precise, nuanced understanding about how humanitarian disarmers challenge not the State's monopoly over lethal force, but its exclusive control over determining il/legitimate means of violence. By scrutinising the discourse of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, the article demonstrates how campaigners compete with the State's claim to act for the universal interest with their own invocations to the universalist discourse of humanity. Their universal affectations, however, are confined to the sanctity of the liberal State as the authorised holder of the right to wage war.

## KEYWORDS

Humanitarian disarmament, autonomous weapons, symbolic violence, the State, Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el potencial epistémico y crítico de la noción bourdieusiana del Estado como monopolio dual de la violencia física y simbólica legitimada. A pesar del creciente uso de la teoría sociológica de Bourdieu en las relaciones internacionales durante las últimas dos décadas, esta noción permanece poco explorada en un área de gran relevancia: el análisis del desarme humanitario. Es precisamente esta noción, sostengo, la que permite una comprensión más precisa y matizada acerca de cómo quienes promueven el desarme humanitario no desafían el monopolio del Estado sobre la fuerza letal, sino su control exclusivo sobre la determinación de los medios i/legítimos de violencia. Mediante un escrutinio del discurso de la Campaña para Detener a los Robots Asesinos, el artículo demuestra cómo los activistas compiten con la pretensión del Estado de actuar en beneficio del interés universal con sus propias invocaciones al discurso universalista de la humanidad. Sin embargo, sus afectaciones universales se limitan a la santidad del Estado liberal como titular autorizado del derecho a hacer la guerra.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Desarme humanitario, armas autónomas, violencia simbólica, el Estado, Campaña para Detener a los Robots Asesinos

## 1. Introduction

Although admittedly «almost unthinkable» owing to its extensive influence on our categories of perception and judgement, the State is the object of recurrent reflection in the late thinking of Pierre Bourdieu (2014, p. 3). A key, if at-first-glance modest contribution to our understanding of it is a brief addition to the famous dictum by German sociologist Max Weber. For Weber (2019, p. 136) the State is a unique form of political organisation «to the extent that, its administrative staff can lay claim to a monopoly of legitimate physical force in the execution of its orders», whereas for Bourdieu (2014, p. 4 emphasis in original) it is so for holding a «monopoly of legitimate physical *and symbolic* violence». Bourdieu (2022, p. 179) is aware that Weber's definition is based on the State's more noticeable dimensions of physical violence, namely, «the violence involved in foreign policy (the power to declare and wage war) and in internal law enforcement (the power to use violence to coerce individual

agents)». But he wants to draw our attention to something less evident, if also more crucial. The State holds a monopoly—although it is «never complete and absolute» (Bourdieu, 2019, p. 126)—of symbolic violence, that is, «the monopoly to decree, to discriminate, to divide and separate» (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 179). Critically, for Bourdieu (2014, p. 4) this monopoly underpins the former, functioning as «the condition for possession of the exercise of the monopoly of physical violence itself».

The nuance and significance of Bourdieu's re-definition of the Weberian conception of the State is generally well understood in the academic discipline of Sociology. This owes in no small measure to the timely contribution of Steven Loyal, who, upon Polity's publication of Bourdieu's lectures given at the Collège de France between 1989 and 1992 under the title *On the State*, authored a compelling reading to Bourdieu's theory of the State. Therein, Loyal clarifies two central aspects of the Bourdieusian notion of the State as a monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence. A symbolic dimension underlies all physical violence, on the one hand, and, on the other, both processes of violence acquire meaning only when a collective of agents with specific dispositions recognise them as legitimate (Loyal, 2017, pp. 68-69). Indeed, that the State can maintain social domination is intimately connected to the very systems of classification and principles of vision and division that it imposes, which mask an otherwise «arbitrary nature of domination» (Loyal, 2017, pp. 69-71). But Loyal goes further in his reading of Bourdieu. That the State can impose these classificatory schemata is also linked to its ability to speak «on behalf of the public and in the name of the universal» (Loyal, 2017, p. 80). Put simply, the State's authority rests on a «fundamental belief that [it] represents public service and disinterestedness, a neutral arbiter standing for the universal interest and collective good» (Loyal, 2017, p. 80).

Curiously, despite growing use of Bourdieu's theory in International Relations (IR) over more than two decades (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Bigo, 2002, 2011; Guzzini, 2000; Jackson, 2009; Pouponneau and Mérand, 2017), his generalisation of Weber's notion of the State is often unsatisfactorily understood or its epistemic potential underexplored. Bringing Bourdieu to the study of global politics has allowed some IR scholars to clarify the State's «privileged position» in the international field of power, resulting from its «historical accumulation of a number of different types of capital (coercive, political, and economic, among others)» (Pouliot and Mérand, 2012, pp. 36-37). Yet, in the same accounts, the State's monopolisation of legitimate physical and symbolic power is concurrently, if unwittingly, reduced to a «Paraphrasing» of Weber's concept of the State (Pouliot and Mérand, 2012, p. 39). In other cases, IR scholars recognise the epistemic

potential of Bourdieu's re-definition of the notion of the State to advance our understanding about the interplay between State sovereignty and «competing articulations of political authority» (Adler-Nissen, 2012b, p. 179), particularly about how «non-state actors such as transnational movements challenge sovereignty by questioning the state's regalian functions» (Adler-Nissen, 2012a, p. 2). However, their ensuing inquiries, frequently focused on supranational challenges to the State's monopoly over symbolic violence—such as those posed by the European Union's diplomatic service to national diplomatic corps (Adler-Nissen, 2012b, 2014)—do not extend to the analysis of the State's resulting ability to exercise *physical* violence.

More oddly, a cluster of IR scholarship particularly interested in such a question as it assesses the challenge of the «humanitarian disarmament movement» (Benjamin-Britton et al., 2020, pp. 1-3) to the State, has overlooked Bourdieu's contribution. Humanitarian disarmament literature examines the use of humanitarian ideas—especially the rejection of arms-inflicted excess suffering and indiscriminate harm—in arms control and disarmament processes driven by a transnational coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs),<sup>1</sup> supported by like-minded States (Benjamin-Britton et al., 2020; Cooper, 2022a; Hynek, 2018). The standard narrative in this literature generally draws from constructivist norms scholarship (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998) and, underscoring the renowned post-Cold War conventions on landmines, cluster munitions, and nuclear weapons, argues that restrictions and prohibitions brought about by this movement's mobilisation of humanitarian principles, contribute to reducing harm and suffering in war (Garcia, 2014, 2015; see also Docherty, 2018, 2013). A twofold assumption underlies this view. Humanitarian norms progressively constrain the lethal violence of the State via both their embedding in incremental disarmament treaties, which norm entrepreneurs pressure them to join, and their intrinsically benevolent normative influence, which reach even those States that fail to formally join the treaties but are concerned by their reputation (see, for instance, Garcia, 2011, 2015). In fact, some see, stemming from these mechanisms a gradual, if slow opening of a

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1 Although I use the common label of *non-governmental* organisations, I remain aware of the multifaceted linkages between NGOs, governments, and domestic politics. As Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth (2006, p. 232) remind us: «The use of the term nongovernmental obscures the fact that NGOs are created by actors with national backgrounds, with strategies and approaches developed in national settings, and with political orientations formed mainly in the context of national political struggles».

path towards emancipation where violence becomes «less acceptable» (Petrova, 2018, p. 628).

This optimistic story is contested. Feminist, postcolonial and other critical scholars argue that both NGO activism and humanitarian ideas operate in a more complex and paradoxical manner than the dominant narrative suggests. Indeed, non-state actors' achievements are tied to an essentialisation of the weapon over the State as the problem (Beier, 2011). Not only does this leave most military practices and arsenals of violent States outside the reach of critical assessment, but the politics that precede them are also obscured (Beier, 2011; Cooper, 2022b). In fact, the successes of humanitarian disarmament activism are bound not only to a disregard for the underlying dynamics of militarism and war preparation, but also to an adequation with liberal militarism (Cooper, 2011; Stavrianakis, 2016). More knottily, the humanitarian framing used in these efforts produces effects that bring into question the alleged progressive potential of the approach. Protections on some populations from the harm of certain weapons are achieved at the cost of channelling military innovation in other directions while war becomes more tolerable (Krause, 2011). As the humanitarian approach disputes not killing but killing with bad (inhumane) weapons—be these deemed indiscriminate or prone to cause excess suffering—it indirectly legitimises the imaginary of good (humane) weapons (Beier, 2011; Cooper, 2022b). Eventually, this contributes to producing a high-tech type of warfare as legitimate and ethical, with Western powers monopolising the claims to its conducting thanks to their nearly exclusive control over such means of violence (Zehfuss, 2011, 2018).

But in a post-Cold War world of ever-increasing humanitarian initiatives in natural co-existence with pointed rises in global military expenditure and arms trade (Cooper, 2022a), let alone unfolding events of interstate conflict and genocide, many questions remain. If we accept that humanitarians can pressure States into joining arms control and disarmament agreements, does this owe uniquely to the effectiveness of the former's depoliticising strategy and the latter's reputational concerns? And, deeply connected to this, does this mean that the legitimacy of the monopoly of the State over physical violence is beyond the stakes in such a process? Moreover, if we accept that humanitarianism contributes to the symbolic production of good and bad means of violence, how does this work? In other words, how do humanitarians take part in the definition of legitimate and illegitimate weapons? And what does this classification do to the legitimised right of the State—or, more precisely, of some

States<sup>2</sup>—to exercise physical violence? Crucially, what challenge, if any, do «humanitarian disarmers» (Benjamin-Britton et al., 2020, p. 4) pose to the State and to the continuity of war? More particularly, I want to ask, could the Bourdieusian notion of the State as the holder of a dual monopoly over legitimised physical and symbolic violence contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the contemporary humanitarian approach to the regulation of weapons?

This is the question that this article answers in response to the call from the editors of this Special Issue to assess the potential and limits of, as well as alternatives to, Bourdieu's sociological theory. It does so by deploying the notion of the State as a dual monopoly of physical and symbolic violence in the analysis of humanitarian disarmament. Specifically, the article examines the ongoing efforts of a transnational alliance of humanitarian and human rights NGOs and experts, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, for regulating autonomous weapons through a mixture of proscriptions and prescriptions of human control. With a focus on its discourse, it reveals how the campaign invokes the universalist vocabulary of humanity to claim a higher symbolic position than the State and thus compete with its legitimised monopoly of symbolic violence. However, this manoeuvre does not contest the Weberian right of the State to declare and wage war, but only its monopoly over determining legitimacy in the means of war. In fact, rather than constraining the ability of the State to resort to war, this symbolic challenge re-produces the legitimised monopoly of *some* States over the right to use lethal violence. In this manner, I argue that the Bourdieusian conception of the State enables a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the scope and effects of the challenge of contemporary humanitarian disarmers to the State.

This critical deployment of Bourdieu's notion of the State—consistent with the «unifying theme» across his *oeuvre*, namely, «a critique of the cultural dynamics of domination» (Jackson, 2009, p. 102)—is distinctively suited to, and relevant for, an IR perspective *from the South*. After all, and as Nirmal Puwar (2009, p. 371) reminds us, Bourdieu's attention to, and theorisation of, symbolic violence «was not developed without an understanding of the violence and inventive modes for survival within

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2 I am aware that, as Baczko and Dorronsoro (2022, p. 205) argue, «the contemporary world includes states incapable of imposing a monopoly of violence within their borders, while simultaneously still having a monopoly on representing their population and territory internationally». Concurrently, the «full rights of sovereignty», including those over «intervention and conquest» of other States have historically been accorded to a few Western powers, benefitting from the universalisation of Western standards (Anghie, 2006, pp. 742-746). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

colonial Algeria». Its then-colonial ruler, France, is the «unthought» State in Bourdieu's conceptualisation (Poupeau, 2018, p. 421). But we might then ask: in what ways are such colonial dynamics still important for the study of the contemporary humanitarian challenge to the State from a Global South perspective? The answer lies in the disconcerting contradiction to be found at its centre. Global South countries have gradually become some of the major supporters of humanitarian initiatives aimed to restrict either the circulation or use of certain means of violence (Bode, 2019; Bromley et al., 2012). Simultaneously, however, these initiatives contribute «to shield the wider world military order from scrutiny while reproducing the South as a site of intervention» (Stavrianakis, 2012, p. 232; see also Dunworth, 2020, pp. 227-229). Indeed, as we shall see, the humanitarian discourse deployed in the challenge to the State over the legitimacy of autonomous weapons reasserts, rather than destabilises, the symbolic order wherein compassionate Western militaries casually intervene in the South.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I explain the rationale for choosing the case of humanitarian advocacy for the regulation of autonomous weapons and briefly describe our current understanding of it. I then clarify my methodology, where I analyse the political struggle between humanitarian disarmament activists and the State through a Bourdieusian assessment of the campaigning discourse of Stop Killer Robots. The second section presents the findings of the study. Specifically, I unveil three dimensions of the challenge of humanitarian disarmers to the State by operationalising Bourdieu's notion of the State. Firstly, I uncover humanitarians' discursive dislocation of the problem of autonomous weapons from the State's monopoly over physical violence and concomitant reallocation of it on humankind. Secondly, I illuminate humanitarian disarmers' symbolic self-ascription of the position of spokesperson of humankind and invocation of the discourse of humanity to challenge the State's monopoly over the legitimate determination of un/acceptable means of war. Thirdly, I reveal the adequation of the campaign's universalist claims with the military practice of the powers that accept the discourse of humanity as a legitimate vocabulary in the system of classification of physical violence. Upon these findings, the concluding section clarifies how Bourdieu's conception of the State advances our understanding about how humanitarian disarmers dispute the State's monopoly over the legitimate naming of in/humane weapons, while concurrently acquiescing to the use of lethal force as part of its prerogatives.

## 2. Materials and Methods

With the «re-emergence» of humanitarian disarmament via the renowned Ottawa Process and the resulting ban treaty on anti-personnel landmines (Cooper, 2022a, p. 504; Dunworth, 2020, p. 2), IR scholarship has become particularly interested in the diplomatic processes and advocacy campaigns over the most varied weapons (Borrie, 2014; Cottrell, 2009; Rosert, 2019). Those pertaining to autonomous weapons attract much of its current attention (Bode, 2019; Ferl, 2024; Hynek and Solovyeva, 2021; Sauer, 2020). Usually understood as weapons systems that once activated «select and apply force to targets without human intervention» (ICRC, 2021, p. 2), and premised as purveyors of multiple military advantages and better compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), autonomous weapons draw the interest of major militaries (Sauer, 2020, pp. 243-244). They are also feared to disrupt global stability, security, and protections on human life (Altmann and Sauer, 2017; Heyns, 2013). Amid such high stakes, IR scholars have become attentive to the tactics and proposals of major actors in the debate, particularly the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (Beier, 2020; Bolton and Mitchell, 2020; Carpenter, 2014, 2016; Rosert and Sauer, 2021; Solovyeva and Hynek, 2023). Co-founded in 2012 by Human Rights Watch and uniting over 250 human rights and humanitarian NGOs, Stop Killer Robots follows the model of prior humanitarian disarmament campaigns, chiefly the Nobel Peace Prize laureate International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Beier, 2020; Rosert and Sauer, 2021). Stop Killer Robots is therefore a key player in the enacting of the humanitarian approach to the regulation of autonomous weapons.

This article follows the growing academic interest in Stop Killer Robots and its enhanced role in the ongoing struggle over the legitimacy of autonomous weapons. My epistemological approximation to the campaign draws from existing applications of Bourdieu's thinking tools in IR aimed to shine a light on the challenge of transnational non-state actors to the State's «regalian functions» (Adler-Nissen, 2012a, p. 2). In particular, I inquiry critically into *what* regalian functions of the State the campaign defies in its current attempt to regulate autonomous weapons and *how* it does so. As seen above, existing literature disagrees over whether humanitarian disarmers progressively curb the legitimised right of the State over lethal violence or rather contribute to reorienting military innovation. While optimists underscore an emancipatory role of humanitarian norms in taming the physical violence of the State, critics suggest that the humanitarian framing of the approach functions to delegitimise some means of war, while concurrently enabling and moralising others. This paradoxical dynamic also benefits Western powers

over other militaries. It is at this crossroad that I propose to deploy Bourdieu's notion of the State as a dual monopoly of legitimised physical and symbolic violence. I use this notion as a prism to illuminate whether physical or symbolic powers of the State are defied by campaigners in the enacting of the humanitarian approach to the regulation of weapons, while dissecting the dimensions of this political process and its effects.

Methodologically, my focus is on the campaign's discourse. As Bourdieu (2022, p. 114) reminds us: «Part of the political process is a verbal process, and so discourse is very important. The spokesman is at once working with words and practising a symbolic manipulation of groups and practices». Within this framework, I examine how Stop Killer Robots uses discourse in a twofold manner. On the one hand, I scrutinise how the campaign uses words to symbolically problematise the practice of lethal violence when exercised through autonomous weaponry, thereby substantiating the need for new legally binding rules. On the other hand, I inspect how the campaign uses words to position itself on a par with the State in this verbal struggle. With this, I do not aim to refute the historical accumulation of different forms of capital underlying the establishing of major humanitarian actors in influential positions alongside the State in the regulation of warfare (see, for instance, Barnett, 2011). Rather, I aim to assess how these agents use discourse to retain such a position, that is, to reproduce their own legitimised presence in this field. Extant scholarship provides us with guidance. Humanitarian actors utilise depoliticising discursive strategies that problematise the weapon over the State, allowing the latter to be part of the solution (Beier, 2011; de Larrinaga and Sjolander, 1998; Petrova, 2018). Apprehensions exist, nonetheless, with the unthreatening and contradictory function that the humanitarian vocabulary used in these efforts can serve (Beier, 2020; Cooper, 2022a).

To excavate the campaign's discourse and reconstruct its meaning, I collect materials from two sites of study that offer unique and complementary contexts. The first one comprises publicly accessible materials of the multilateral talks on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) hosted by the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) at the United Nations in Geneva. Although these discussions have more recently expanded to the UN General Assembly, the CCW remains critical to our understanding of the symbolic operations of the campaign's discourse. Indeed, prior to this and for a decade, the CCW offered «the only international deliberative forum where LAWS are substantially and regularly discussed and [...] the focal point of norm promotion and lobbying activities of civil society actors, such as chiefly the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots» (Bode, 2019, p. 361). Thus, I collect statements, reports,

and regulatory proposals whereby campaigners discursively construct both the problem of LAWS and their part in addressing it. These have been retrieved from the websites of the campaign, Human Rights Watch, and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs. But as Bourdieu (1992, p. 38) prompts us to consider, «it is in relation to a market that the complete determination of the signification of discourse occurs». The CCW-based *market* is one where States use their own discursive strategies, both to support and to counter those of the campaign (Bode, 2019; Ferl, 2024; Solovyeva and Hynek, 2023). Notably, this is an arena where States, considering IHL principles and customarily by consensus, agree on new legal rules (Cottrell, 2009; Sauer, 2020).

My second site of study is an assemblage of the campaign's textual and audio-visual materials posted and shared across different online platforms, including its own website and channels on Medium, Vimeo, and YouTube. The rationale for including discursive materials aimed at a wider audience than the diplomats, military officials, and experts formally involved in the UN-based multilateral talks, is that «the outcome of the internal struggles depends on the power that the agents and institutions involved in this struggle can mobilize from outside the field» (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 188). Indeed, the effectiveness of Stop Killer Robots in prompting the general public's rejection to autonomous weapons and support to its advocacy for regulation has been a recurrent concern among scholars backing its campaigning strategies (see, for instance, Rosert and Sauer, 2019, 2021). In this site, I thus collect news, blog posts, videos, and documentaries generally used by campaigners with a view to «mobilising the public» (Stop Killer Robots, 2023b, p. 12) in their challenge to the favourable views of some States on autonomous weapons and outwith the linguistic constraints of the IHL-delimited market abovementioned. Indeed, as we shall see, this site provides access to more vivid and non-legal invocations to the language of humanity in the campaign's symbolic construction of the problem of autonomous weaponry and of its role in addressing it as spokesperson of humankind. The collection of these materials has hence allowed me to empirically enrich and analytically nuance my reconstruction of the meaning of the campaign's discourse.

This research has been conducted in the framework of a larger research project focused on the contemporary humanitarian approach to the regulation of the means of violence and autonomous weapons. Data collection, analysis and reporting of my findings has complied with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Code of Conduct for Journal Editors (COPE). In particular, the conducting of fieldwork upon which this article is based, received ethical approval through the relevant

process at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science on 2 September 2020. Data collection extended from that date until 2024. All documents employed in the article—ranging from official statements and working papers to website entries and blog posts, among other materials—are of public access and have been duly referenced. Hyperlinks have been provided for online resources and checked to be correct up to 15 December 2025. Lastly, although the large majority of these empirical materials have been prepared on behalf of Stop Killer Robots as a single entity, a few of them have been authored by its co-founder and former coordinator organisation Human Rights Watch with the support of the Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC). These cases are clearly identifiable and have been treated appropriately in the following section.

### 3. Findings: Elucidating the humanitarian challenge to the State through a Bourdieusian lens

Autonomy in weapons systems is a profoundly human problem. Killer robots change the relationship between people and technology by handing over life and death decision-making to machines. They challenge human control over the use of force, and where they target people, they dehumanise us—reducing us to data points (Stop Killer Robots, 2022b).

The discourse of Stop Killer Robots is fraught with tension. It is based on the ascription of agency to autonomous weapons, yet this is immediately problematised. LAWS are agents when, upon their autonomous functions, are portrayed as being capable of *challenging* human control and *targeting* human beings. But they are not quite so when campaigners claim that their potential victims will not be «seen» but «processed» (Stop Killer Robots, 2021a), thereby *reduced* to binary code. Scholars supporting the campaign's efforts to regulate LAWS suggest an issue of imperfect agency. For all their autonomous capabilities, they tell us, LAWS lack uniquely human features, such as mercy and kindness (Sharkey, 2011, p. 121, 2012, p. 793), thus hindering victims from the possibility to appeal to their killers' humanity (Heyns, 2017, p. 63). Critics, however, provide us with important caveats and a warning. Humanitarian disarmers have ascribed agency to certain weapons long before killer robots. Essentialising them as the problem has depoliticising effects that allow States—even their users—to join in their repudiation «as a humanitarian scourge without simultaneously repudiating recourse to military violence more generally» (Beier, 2011, pp. 170-172). Attributing agency to LAWS then again obscures the politics that «always precedes the weapon» (Beier, 2020, pp. 14-15). Thornily, this also draws campaigners and the post-Cold War, militaristic

rhetoric of smart, precise weaponries and associated imaginary of costless wars «into deep, if unintended, conceptual alignment» (Beier, 2020, p. 14).

Through a Bourdieusian prism, we can elucidate more clearly how this tactic is linked with the strategic positioning of humanitarian disarmers in the political struggle with the State in the age of algorithmic warfare. Indeed, campaigners construct the problem of autonomous weapons by discursively dislocating them from the State's monopoly of physical violence and, concurrently, reallocating them as humanity's problem—the *profoundly human problem* Stop Killer Robots speaks about. Not only does this depoliticise the debate, so that «the State can position itself as part of the solution» (de Larrinaga and Sjolander, 1998, p. 139). Invoking humanity fulfils other two intertwined symbolic functions. It enables campaigners to substantiate a claim to a universal viewpoint higher than that of the State, namely, that of speaking for humankind. Concurrently, and as spokesperson of humanity, the campaign lays claim to the right of the State to determine legitimacy in the means of violence, challenging its legitimised monopoly of symbolic violence. Yet this does not offer the emancipatory potential expected by optimists. For the struggle also entails an arbitrary adequation of the discourse of humanity with the military practice of Western powers. Their ostensible acceptance of a place for the vocabulary and considerations of humanity in the legitimate system of classification of violence, and of humanitarians in its governance, reinforces their continued possession of the right to execute lethal force on human populations. A detailed explanation of these findings ensues.

### **Autonomous weapons as humanity's problem**

The campaigning discourse of Stop Killer Robots is bound to a paradoxical mystification of the State's monopoly of war. Evidence from high-tech militaries allows campaigners demonstrate the increasing development and use of autonomous functions in weapons systems, with the US Phalanx Close-In Weapons System and Israel's Sentry Tech system featuring as frequent examples of the «path» towards full autonomy (Human Rights Watch and IHRC, 2012). Yet the State rapidly disappears from the frame. Rather, it is the prospect of «allowing machines to select targets and use force without any meaningful human control» what, for the campaign (2018), would be «abhorrent, immoral, and an affront to the concept of human dignity and principles of humanity».<sup>3</sup> As seen above,

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3 An assessment of this argument falls beyond the scope of this article. For existing analyses, see Rosa Brooks (2015), Peter Asaro (2016), Dieter Birnbacher (2016), Michael Horowitz (2016), Amanda Sharkey (2019), and Kevin Jon Heller (2023).

scholars often explain the former as a depoliticising discursive strategy. By dissociating the weapon from the State and objectifying it as the cause of the humanitarian crisis, humanitarians allow the State to be part of the solution (Beier, 2011; de Larrinaga and Sjolander, 1998; Petrova, 2018). Surely, the latter continues to attract the interest of the campaign, which recurrently «urges» States at the UN-based talks to work towards a legal framework (Stop Killer Robots, 2018, p. 1, 2023a, p. 6). However, Stop Killer Robots discursively enacts a more complex dislocation of the problem from the State. The problem, or the major apprehension of humanitarian disarmers with the advent of algorithmic warfare, as we shall see, is defined as one where humanity becomes answerable for removing itself from the decision-making process and exercise of lethal force.

This shifts the problem of autonomous weapons away from the legitimised monopoly of violence of the State—with the most powerful States developing lethal AI (see Haner and Garcia, 2019) thus erased—and towards an abstract notion of the human in a twofold manner. On the one hand, the human becomes negatively responsible for the harm expected onto victims of autonomous military violence. In other words, it is the absence of the human, the lack of their purportedly unique features, particularly empathy and compassion, what humanitarians assert as the main cause for the legal and ethical intolerability of LAWS. Indeed, for campaigners, the unacceptability of autonomous weapons lies on the removal of the human and its replacement by robotic sensors and algorithmic functions. As Stop Killer Robots (2021b, p. 2) claims:

Sensor-based weapons systems that apply force due to the presence or proximity of a person would use proxy indicators (such as weight, heat-signal shape, «object recognition,» movement or biometrics) as a basis for encoding patterns of sensor data (target profiles) intended to represent humans. We consider these systems unacceptable because they reduce people to objects, and so are dehumanizing to civilian and military victims alike.

So defined the problem, the argument that ensues is one for the re-incorporation of the human and their qualities to counter the *dehumanisation* of violence. The humanitarian solution—which I inspect below—entails «retaining» so-called «meaningful human control» over the use of lethal force (Stop Killer Robots, 2020).

On the other hand, a collective of humans, or humanity, rather than the State, or more precisely a few powerful States, becomes responsible in a more direct manner. Indeed, Stop Killer Robots often holds *us*, that is, an abstract aggregation of human beings, responsible for bringing lethal AI into existence. The «technologies that we create», the campaign

(2021b, p. 5) defends, should be «kept within our own control and used for the benefit of humanity». «Killer robots don't just appear —we create them», the campaign (2022a) repeats before calling on us «to act now [...] before the technological developments have gone too far». It is certainly not my intention here to deny the fact that numerous humans are involved in the research, development, and use of the most varied means of violence. As sociocultural anthropologist Talal Asad (2015, p. 427) reminds us, «lethal violence in modern war is made possible only through complicated mediations involving many hands and minds», and involving «manufacturers, programmers, and commanders», among others. But the campaign extends responsibility to a decontextualised we, which aims to capture humankind in its entirety. «We all need to take responsibility for the development and use of technology, and for the role it plays in our lives», its website asserts (Stop Killer Robots, 2022b). As I demonstrate in what follows, this enables the campaign to substantiate its most specific challenge to the State, not to its exclusive right to wage war, but to its control over determining what weapons are il/legitimate.

### Struggling for the monopoly of symbolic violence

That the State holds a monopoly of symbolic violence means that it has «the power to say what you are» (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 206). In other words, the State holds the power of «official naming» through which it imposes the legitimate vision and division of the social world (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 239). At the CCW in Geneva, the clearest expression of this monopoly is the ability of States to agree on, and legally impose the vision about, what weapons fail to meet the military and humanitarian considerations of IHL, thereby dividing the means of war into acceptable and unacceptable categories. As for killer robots, scholars show that States still disagree on this matter with major militaries defending the development and use of autonomous weapons, including on grounds of enhancing civilian protection via technological advances in accuracy and operational situational awareness (Rosendorf, 2021, p. 44; Solovyeva and Hynek, 2023, p. 2563). For Stop Killer Robots, however, and as we have seen, LAWS should be prohibited. These emerge in the campaigning discourse as inherently problematic weapons due to their dehumanised materiality (that is, lacking human qualities) and associated dehumanising effects (especially, the denial of compassion to human victims). What this shows is that campaigners dispute the monopoly of States over *naming* what weapons should be classified as unacceptable means of war. Put in another manner, humanitarian disarmers struggle with the State for what Bourdieu (2022, p. 251) calls «the monopoly of the verdict», that is, «to be God».

Crucially, this challenge is partly possible by the symbolic nature of the discourse that humanitarians invoke in the discursive dislocation of the problem of LAWS from the State and concurrent reallocation into *humanity*. Indeed, the discourse of humanity is not just any discourse, but one that enables humanitarians to compete with the claims of the State to act «on behalf of the public and in the name of the universal» (Loyal, 2017, p. 80) by making their own claims to universality. As Martti Koskeniemi (2012, p. 397) underscores, «invoking humanity is a convenient strategy to make the speaker's values seem universal, and therefore unobjectionable». This is the discursive strategy that the campaign uses when disputing States' favourable vision of algorithmic warfare. «Our humanity», the campaign maintains, «should not be reduced to physical features or patterns of behaviour, to be analysed and pattern-matched by systems unable to understand concepts of life, human rights or liberty» (Stop Killer Robots, 2021a). The campaign also relies on this strategy when it defends its solution to the problem of LAWS, namely, maintaining the means of war under meaningful human control as «the response the world urgently needs» (Stop Killer Robots, 2023e). By laying claim to *humanity* and the *world*, the campaign symbolically manipulates its own standing in the verbal struggle with the State, nominating itself the legitimate spokesperson of humankind.

It is here where optimistic accounts often confuse this mobilisation of the discourse of humanity in the symbolic struggle over the legitimacy of certain weapons with the actualisation of a slow process of human emancipation running alongside the gradual de-legitimation of war (see, for instance, Garcia,, 2011, 2015; Petrova, 2018). The underlying assumption is that humanity—both as a collective of human beings and as a feeling of compassion towards the suffering of others (Fassin, 2012, p. 2)—is increasingly imposing upon the physical violence of the State; gradually imposing on war. The work of legal and historical scholar Samuel Moyn in reconstructing the roots of this assumption is helpful in this regard. Long have humanitarians, and at important junctures of the recent history of the regulation of warfare, argued that humanity will eventually defeat war (Moyn, 2021, pp. 31-32). As Gustave Moynier (1864, quoted in Moyn, 2021, p. 31), the Swiss co-founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross, had already claimed during the early days of the humanitarian project, «the end of the road cannot be less than the condemnation of war in absolute terms». Over a hundred and sixty years later, however, no such comprehensive denunciation of warfare emerges from the examination of humanitarian disarmament advocacy. More precisely, and through a Bourdieusian lens, the image that is formed is one where humanitarians

confine their demands to a terrain where the State, particularly the liberal State, remains the exclusive legitimate holder of the right to wage war. War, as we will see, emerges not condemned but consecrated in its liberal form by the discourse of humanity.

### **Legitimizing the liberal State's monopoly of physical violence**

The discourse of campaigners is certainly not devoid of clarity about the agents that would be *de facto* illegitimate holders of the right to exercise physical force, let alone to develop, obtain, or use fully autonomous weapons. Non-state armed groups and repressive regimes «that flout international humanitarian law» (Human Rights Watch and IHRC, 2015, p. 9, 2016, pp. 32-37) are the common imaginaries of entities unauthorised by humanitarian disarmers to use lethal force. But the main problem with these, for humanitarians, is not that they might just fail to meet IHL and, as a result, «endanger civilians» (Human Rights Watch and IHRC, 2015, p. 10). Rather, it is that they are not to be trusted. Should the development and use of LAWS be regulated, instead of subjected to an outright prohibition, campaigners fear that these actors «might disregard the restrictions or alter or override any programming designed to regulate the weapons' behavior» (Human Rights Watch and IHRC, 2016, p. 37). In fact, campaigners claim that these actors «could use the weapons against their own people or civilians in other countries with horrific consequences» (Human Rights Watch and IHRC, 2016, p. 37). Curiously, the antithetical figure to these illegitimate users of lethal violence does not remain implicit in the discourse of the campaign. Used to flesh out both the stigma on LAWS and the demand for maintaining the use of lethal force under human control, the State re-surfaces, with its liberal articulation transmuting into the legitimate holder of the monopoly of war.

Indeed, Stop Killer Robots relies on the military practice of liberal States to construct its discursive juxtaposition of *inhumane* LAWS and *humane* human soldiers. From the campaign's online platforms, veterans supporting its advocacy or advising its member organisations tell us why solely liberal militaries should be trusted with using lethal force. Unlike robots, we hear from a former Belgian officer, they have been «formed and trained under military, ethical and moral standards [to] respect international humanitarian law and human life» (Stop Killer Robots, 2021c, 2023c). The message is echoed by a retired Canadian officer, whose open letter decries how robots' decisions «to kill would not be the result of the skills, knowledge, intelligence, training, experience, humanity, morality, situational awareness, and understanding of the laws of war and

international humanitarian law that men and women in uniform use to make such decisions in battle» (Stop Killer Robots, 2023c). With a marked colonial subtext, Retired British Admiral Lord West makes it even clearer:

the issue of human decision-making over whether to shoot or not comes over most frequently [...when] you're imposing order and you're having to deal with civilians [...] and you have to make rapid decisions about: «is this person, who's just come around this corner with a rifle, are they gonna try and kill me, or is it because they all carry rifles around here?» And humans are very good at making that assessment and not just killing everyone. For example, a wounded enemy, once you realise he's injured and he's effectively surrendered, then he's given protection and looked after (Stop Killer Robots, 2022c).

In many ways, the human the campaign seeks to reinstate to solve the problem of LAWS is not just *any* human. It is the human soldier bound to the liberal State and its military practice; it is the human who claims to use lethal force compassionately, respectfully of humankind. Thus, the discourse of humanity mobilised by the campaign from its purported position of spokesperson of humankind does not function to reject war or to contest the monopoly of these States over physical violence. Rather, this discourse adapts to a set of features that characterise military training in, and use of lethal violence by, liberal States that lay claim to the same vocabulary of humanity. In other words, and to re-phrase my argument, the challenge humanitarian disarmers pose to the State is not to its monopoly of physical violence, but rather to its monopoly over naming in/humane means of war. For naming to be legitimate, humanitarians defend, the voice of humankind mobilised by humanitarian activists must be heard and attended. The demands of humankind, however, are not set in opposition to the State's monopoly over the use of lethal force but are instead shaped by the arbitrary acceptance of the liberal State as the legitimate holder of physical violence. Its claimed acceptance of the same language of humanity for the determination of il/legitimate means of violence, provides it with the legitimacy to maintaining a monopoly over war.

#### 4. Conclusions

Echoing contemporary readings with and beyond Bourdieu (Baczko and Dorronsoro, 2022; Moraes, 2025), the article has made a case for unleashing the epistemic and critical potential of his sociological theory to advancing our understanding of the humanitarian approach to the regulation of weapons, as enacted in the Stop Killer Robots campaign. Epistemically, Bourdieu's notion of the State contributes to qualifying the

scope of the humanitarian challenge to the State's monopoly of violence. As seen above, humanitarian disarmers' production of the problem of algorithmic violence is detached from a potential problematisation of the militaristic and political logics of State violence more widely. Thus, scholars' optimistic assumptions about the contribution of the approach to incremental disarmament and the gradual opening of a pathway to emancipation and peace become problematic. In fact, although critics have long identified the limitations of this one-technology-at-a-time approach to disarmament without a strategic dispute of militarism (Cooper, 2022b; Stavrianakis, 2016), the Bourdieusian prism adds further nuance. The discursive mechanism whereby contemporary humanitarian disarmers detach the weapon from the State's monopoly of war is intimately connected to their claims to a higher moral ground than that of the State, which functions not to counter the State's exclusive right to use violence but to construct the model of the legitimate holder of the monopoly over war. In other words, by invoking humanity, humanitarians claim to speak *for* humanity, and, from that position, they re-produce the symbolic order wherein the State—or, more precisely, some States—holds a legitimate right to use lethal violence.

Seen from a different angle, the challenge that humanitarian disarmers pose to the State is to its exclusive control over naming legitimate and illegitimate means of war, that is, its monopoly over symbolic violence. The humanitarian approach to the regulation of the means of violence entails a political struggle for the right to determine what counts as humane and inhumane means of death-dealing. In this struggle, as the case of Stop Killer Robots shows, campaigners substantiate a symbolic challenge to the State by invoking and deploying the discourse of humanity. Laying claim to this discourse in the construction of the problem of autonomous weapons—as dehumanising and dehumanised means of war—allows humanitarians to legitimise their own position in the struggle. As the problem is defined as one where humanity is both victim of, and answerable for, autonomous violence, humanitarians justify the need to hear *from* humanity. In parallel, their invocation of this universalist discourse also allows humanitarian disarmers to lay claim to the symbolic standing of speaking *for* humanity. Upon this universalist position, humanitarian disarmers challenge the exclusive control of the State over naming un/acceptable means of war, concurrently guaranteeing their own place in their governance.

Thus, the critical contribution of the Bourdieusian lens lies on its uncovering of the function that the discourse of humanity deployed in the contemporary humanitarian approach to the regulation of weapons serves in the consecration of the State's monopoly over physical violence.

Whereas dominant, optimistic accounts in this literature underscore the potential of humanitarian norms to reduce human suffering and restrain the violence of the State, this study shines a light on how the same vocabulary can sustain the legitimacy of the State's right to wage war. Bourdieu's (2014, p. 4) understanding of the monopoly of symbolic violence as «the condition for possession of the exercise of the monopoly of physical violence itself» provides us with the key. As the case under analysis shows, the challenge of humanitarian disarmament campaigners on the State re-asserts the place of compassion in the legitimate system of classification of weapons. The acquiescence of States to the legitimacy of this discourse emerges as the *condition* for their continued right over waging war. This is precisely what we can see in Stop Killer Robots' juxtaposition of the problem of inhumane autonomous weapons with the solution of maintaining lethal decision-making and the practice of killing, at least ostensibly, under State-bound human hands and minds.<sup>4</sup> The legitimacy of the latter is made conditional to their assertion to conducting essentially violent practices while still respecting humanitarian principles and moral standards, such as tending compassionately to their surrendered enemies. Acquiescence to humanity upholds their continued possession of the monopoly over the use of lethal force.

But despite the considerable number of States that could assert their militaries' respect for humanitarian law and various moral canons, the most salient voices, and hence the unmistakable beneficiaries are just a few. Western powers, even those positioned among the leaders in lethal AI and autonomous weapons development such as the UK (Haner and Garcia, 2019), emerge as the custodians of humane practices of warfare. In fact, even if the campaign's materials helpfully allow us to catch a glimpse of the internal struggles within liberal powers for the legitimacy of algorithmic warfare, the image that emerges clearer is that of humane militaries. As we have seen in the campaign's screening of the recollection of Admiral Lord West, former head of the British Royal Navy, imposing order in faraway countries with unusual, exotic customs is not without difficulties and limits; the enforcer must control his violence and, when his enemies have eventually surrendered, reach compassionately to them and offer them protection.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining the means of war

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4 For a scrutiny of how allegedly *meaningful* extant practices of human control over weapons have, in fact, already been «minimised» and «made impossibly complex» due to human-machine interaction, see Bode and Watts (2021, p. 9). See also Bode and Huelss (2022, pp. 157-210).

5 I use the pronoun *his* to illustrate both the example of Admiral Lord West and the co-constitutive relationship between heteropatriarchy and militarism underscored in feminist

and, more generally, lethal violence under meaningful human control, as the campaign continues to demand upon these stories (Stop Killer Robots, 2023d), becomes maintaining this caricature of civilised and compassionate warfare. It means entrenching the nearly exclusive winners that result from the legitimization of this imaginary. After all, if something distinguishes the violence of progressive modern States, including liberal democratic ones, in the words of Asad (2007, p. 3), is «a combination of cruelty and compassion that sophisticated social institutions enable and encourage».

Lastly, the article concludes with a more explicit call to Global South IR scholarship. Our use of Bourdieu's distinctive method and thinking tools in the study of international politics should aim to interrogate power and uncover the mis-recognised, multi-layered dynamics of symbolic and physical domination. The humanitarian governance of political violence remains a fertile ground for doing this. More precisely, we, Global South academics, should continue to enquire critically into the imaginaries of civilised, restrained, and compassionate warfare formed by the operation of the humanitarian discourse in the regulation of means and methods of violence. Some of the critical questions that we should continue to address are who benefits from this? and who loses? Others could encompass a more detailed examination of the paradoxical effects that the symbolic act of classification of humane and inhumane forms of death-dealing produces. In the age of algorithmic warfare, we should continue to interrogate the part that humanitarianism plays in rejecting the *inhumanity* of transferring lethal decision-making to artificial intelligence, while concomitantly guaranteeing the continuity of the institution of human war and the practice of killing. In other words, we should ask whether countering the threat of killer robots requires protecting the future of the human war machine.

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IR theory (see Catignani and Basham, 2021; Enloe, 2000). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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