

**СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ФИЛОСОФИЯ/SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/IRJ.2026.168.119> EDN: ZSPXTK**WE ARE ALL NEUROTIC PLAYERS: GAME THEORY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND WARS**

Research article

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Abstract

This article analyzes neurosis as a collective and political phenomenon by articulating game theory and psychoanalysis. Inspired by Clarice Lispector, it examines conflicts, from interpersonal relations to wars, as strategic interactions marked by uncertainty, repetition, and power asymmetry. It uses concepts such as non-cooperative games, incomplete information, and payoffs, while psychoanalysis highlights the role of the unconscious and repetition. The analysis considers cases such as the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, between Israel and Palestine, as well as gender-based violence, understood as repeated games. Finally, it emphasizes the ethical need to reflect on politics and war in a context of increasing circulation of violent discourses that shape the social body. In our methodology, game theory is employed as a holistic tool, assisting in guiding our interpretations, organizing the analyzed phenomena, and identifying patterns of repetition that may contribute to the subject's understanding of certain occurrences. It is applied here not as a rigid mathematical apparatus, but as a heuristic and interpretive tool.

Keywords: game theory, psychoanalysis, collective neurosis, repeated games, power asymmetry.**МЫ ВСЕ НЕВРОТИЧНЫЕ ИГРОКИ: ТЕОРИЯ ИГР, ПСИХОАНАЛИЗ И ВОЙНЫ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В этой статье невроз анализируется как коллективный и политический феномен, сопоставляющий теорию игр и психоанализ. Опираясь на работы Кларисы Лиспектор, авторы рассматривают конфликты, от межличностных отношений до войн, как стратегические взаимодействия, характеризующиеся неопределенностью, повторяемостью и асимметрией власти. Используются такие понятия, как некооперативные игры, неполная информация и выигрыши, в то время как психоанализ подчеркивает роль бессознательного и повторения. В анализе рассматриваются такие примеры, как конфликты между Россией и Украиной, между Израилем и Палестиной, а также гендерное насилие, понимаемое как повторяющиеся игры. В заключение подчеркивается этический императив понимания политики и войны в контексте растущего распространения дискурсов насилия, которые формируют общественное тело. В нашей методологии теория игр используется как холистический инструмент, помогающий направлять наши интерпретации, организовывать анализируемые феномены и выявлять паттерны повторения, которые могут способствовать пониманию субъектом определённых явлений. Она применяется здесь не как жёсткий математический аппарат, а как эвристический и интерпретативный инструмент.

Ключевые слова: теория игр, психоанализ, коллективный невроз, повторяющиеся игры, асимметрия власти.**Introduction**

The research proposed here aims to shed light on neurosis through the idea that “we are all war neurotics.” The Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector originally articulated this idea in her literary work. This statement grounded the discussions of the FILPSI Research Group during the second semester of 2025. The present discussion constitutes one among several proposed by the group, articulating the notion of a collective neurosis, particularly in light of the effects of the many wars currently affecting the world (Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, the United States and Israel against Iran, among many others), together with game theory, in order to analyze different types of relationships, whether amorous, political, economic, or otherwise, through the concept of games.

As this is an interdisciplinary study, we seek to articulate these fields in a manner that respects their respective methodologies. We aim to show that, through game theory, we can understand much of what causes us discomfort and, therefore, our neuroses of everyday life. At the core of this discussion lies an ethical concern regarding the need to address politics and war, as these forces can affect even those subjects who are not directly involved in them, thereby impacting the entire social body.



In a world so highly interconnected, the time required to receive violent content and hateful discourse is significantly reduced; however, the time devoted to their critical analysis is likewise diminished. Consequently, we can understand the failure in the assimilation of the Other's discourse, including those discourses that the subject ought to adopt in a critical and ethical manner.

Game theory

Game theory emerges in the fields of mathematics and economics; however, different disciplines have increasingly adopted it, particularly in the domains of politics and the social sciences. Game theory allows us to describe the relations and actions of different subjects in scenarios in which players (the subjects) choose one course of action or another in response to the choices of their opponents, ie, the other player. We understand these situations as involving a relation either between one subject and another or among groups of subjects, companies, or countries and governments. In our methodology, game theory is employed as a holistic tool, assisting in guiding our interpretations, organizing the analyzed phenomena, and identifying patterns of repetition that may contribute to the subject's understanding of certain occurrences. It is applied here not as a rigid mathematical apparatus, but as a heuristic and interpretive tool.

There is, therefore, an analysis of the interactions among these players and their choices, choices that are, above all, conscious decisions. It is important to keep this in mind, as it constitutes a crucial point regarding its application to psychoanalysis, where the focus lies precisely on the subject of the unconscious. In *An Introduction to Game Theory for Linguists* (2006), Anton Benz, Gerhard Jäger, and Robert van Rooij argue that:

"In a very general sense we can say that we play a game together with other people whenever we have to decide between several actions such that the decision depends on the choice of actions by others and on our preferences over the ultimate results" [2, P. 1].

We note here the presence of elements that prove particularly rich for this discussion: beyond the social context (the subject and an other, that is, at least two players), we find the notions of decision, action, preferences (which we may also understand as desires or inclinations), and, finally, the idea of an outcome. In certain games, one may judge that the ends justify the means, depending on the actions and choices made during the course of play. Despite the ethical implications inherent in this perspective, we must understand that player A acts in such a way as to obtain the greatest possible benefits from the relation (the game) with player B.

We must therefore take into account the desires and expectations of others. As we know, this is a complex task, for it requires language to construct a rich and "successful" symbolic framework, one capable of establishing dialogue among the players. The danger lies in the possibility that other players may, in fact, be cheating, pursuing their own interests in order to "win" the game of these relations.

Anton Benz, Gerhard Jäger, and Robert van Rooij introduce what they call "cooperative games" and "non-cooperative games." Language, or, more precisely, communication, constitutes an essential component of the former, as the parties involved in the game must establish mutual understanding. They write:

"In a cooperative game, players are free to make binding agreements in preplay communications. Especially, this means that players can form coalitions. In non-cooperative games no binding agreements are possible and each player plays for himself. In our discussion of the prisoners' dilemma we will see how the ability to make binding agreements can dramatically change the character and solutions of a game" [2, P. 9].

Here, the rules of the game, as well as possible agreements and alliances, are established. We may think, for example, of trade agreements between different countries, in which both parties benefit from partnerships and investments through negotiated arrangements. As a mathematical theory, game theory provides formal structures to facilitate the analysis of such games, which the aforementioned authors present in the following manner:

"Games are played by players. Hence, in a description of a game we must find a set of players, ie the people who choose actions and have preferences over outcomes. This implies that actions and preferences must be represented too in our game models. Let $N = \{1, \dots, n\}$ denote the set of players. Then we assume that for each player there is a set A_i that collects all actions, or moves, that can be chosen by him. We call A_i player i 's action set. An action given, or action profile, is an n -tuple (a_1, \dots, a_n) of actions where each $a_i \in A_i$. The assumption is that they are performed simultaneously. player makes only one move, these two notions coincide" [2, P. 9].

In simplified terms, we consider a group of players who can be classified numerically (player A, player B, and so on). Each player has a set of possible actions (A_i, A_{ii} , etc.), and each action produces an outcome. Depending on the opponent's choices, a player may choose a different course of action. The notation $a_i \in A_i$ indicates that the action chosen by player i belongs to that player's set of possible actions. As players make these choices simultaneously—and each player remains "blind" to the steps (actions) chosen by the others—critical analysis of one's own choices becomes necessary. To support such analysis, players rely on prior experience, a history of previous games in which similar choices may recur. We will see below how this framework can be reflected in the analysis of events such as wars.

The fact that one cannot know which choices the other player will make within their set of possible actions introduces uncertainty, in other words, anxiety itself. Players make such choices either on the basis of their own interests or on the basis of prior experience. In political terms, we may relate this to what Hannah Arendt described as the uncertainty inherent in political life. For the author, since politics constitutes a human project, and since human beings are naturally unpredictable, it becomes difficult to determine in advance which actions they will adopt. She writes in *The Human Condition* (1958):

"In this aspect of action—all-important to the modern age, to its enormous enlargement of human capabilities as well as to its unprecedented concept and consciousness of history—processes are started whose outcome is unpredictable, so that uncertainty rather than frailty becomes the decisive character of human affairs" [1, P. 232].



In this sense, Hannah Arendt's view stands in direct opposition to that of game theory. She argues that, particularly in the case of large groups of players, actions may produce entirely unexpected outcomes, which we must take into account. Through game theory, however, we may at least organize a set of probabilities grounded in prior historical patterns.

Games and war

In politics, different tendencies and tools support the interpretation of the possible outcomes of particular actions. One such tool is propaganda. Today, we can analyze specific propaganda materials and understand the interests underlying their production, that is, the initial intentions and the desired outcomes. Propaganda thus functions as a component within the political game that cannot be ignored [5]. During World War II, the Nazi regime employed this strategy in order to construct the image of a common enemy for the so-called “purely” German people: the Jew. In the contemporary context, we may also analyze, for example, the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict through the lens of propaganda as a means of stabilizing and advancing political aims: on the one hand, Russia's pursuit of domination, appealing to a supposed sense of shared origin among the peoples of the region, and, on the other, Ukraine's resistance, through symbols that constitute a national identity independent of Russian identity.

To this end, we examine two articles published by Gleb Trufanov: *The European Integration as a Strategic Source for the Ukrainian Democratic Media and the EU in Countering Russian Propaganda* (2025), published in the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, and *Russian Discursive Transits in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War* (2026), published in the *Politeja*. In these works, the author presents an analysis of propaganda as a tool of both domination and resistance, employed simultaneously by both countries. Trufanov argues that, during periods of war, actors deploy both conventional and non-conventional methods, thereby constituting a form of hybrid warfare [11, P. 110].

Although the author does not employ game theory as part of his methodology, he presents an analysis that we can incorporate into our own reading. For example, we may consider the use of power (whether coercive, as in the case of the arbitrary economic tariffs imposed on various countries by Donald Trump) in order to induce the opponent to act in certain ways, from the perspective of Robert A. Dahl, also employed by Trufanov. Power, then, may be understood as “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” [4, P. 202–203].

Here, we observe a subversion of games that ought to be cooperative, insofar as player A compels player B to act not according to B's own interests, but in accordance with the rules and interests imposed by A. One party thus disregards the previously established rules; however, we may expect player B to respond in kind. In the case of the tariffs imposed by the United States of America, this dynamic became evident in the retaliatory measures adopted by China against the United States.

With regard to Russia's propaganda efforts, the author highlights, above all, the initiative to enter Western media spaces from a more favorable perspective. This includes the interview granted by Vladimir Putin to the American journalist Tucker Carlson [11, P. 112]. He then writes:

“The Russian wartime discourse of hostility in the media is a special social formation. In this case, it represents not only the summary of intentions, mental concepts, and historical perceptions of Putin's regime but also describes the whole era of Putin's reign through the prism of the political understanding of the role of Russia in the modern world. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia has struggled with the deprivation of positive media representation in the Western media. Russian war discourse and the positive will of the Kremlin found themselves underreported. This forced Russia to seek new relevant tools for the political discourse transition to gain approval and continue to make an impact on Western media recipients. This impact is essential for Russia to make a tool for fighting the Western critical narrative to create a positive image of the Russian state's decisions, the ineffectiveness of Western sanctions, and the support of Ukraine” [10, P. 269].

Here, we identify a set of variables that are particularly relevant to the context of our research: a “synthesis of intentions,” that is, a cluster of interests and desires derived from philosophical concepts and historical perceptions, factors responsible for shaping such interests, and a set of desired outcomes: “gaining approval,” “influencing the public,” and “to create a positive image of the Russian state's decisions.” These are constitutive elements in an analysis grounded in game theory.

In addition to this analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, we also highlight the work of Aneela Shahzad in her article *Israel-Gaza War: Geopolitics and the Game Theory* (2025). Drawing on game theory, the author systematically analyzes the genocide carried out by Israel against the Palestinian people, a process that has intensified since 2024, but that has been unfolding for more than seventy years.

The author argues that a limitation of analysis through game theory lies in the fact that such models often remain overly restrictive, failing to take into account factors of unpredictability, for instance, the number of players, which may increase or decrease over the course of the game. In this sense, although the conflict ostensibly involves Israel and Palestine, we must also recognize another player: the United States. She writes:

“Real life is different from that, as in the number of players in any given situation can be added or subtracted; the players are free to choose from several choices that have historically been made in similar situations, or the players can come up with a new unique choice of action. In most cases where the players are conditioned, and because all games have been played several times throughout the course of history, they will choose from choices that have been played before and will, therefore, be predictable to an extent by their opponents. But there is always the possibility with real, rethinking humans, especially in hard times, that they find new choices and strategies to play the same game” [9, P. 24].

This perspective aligns with what Hannah Arendt identified as the unpredictability of human action. We may take this argument a step further by aligning it with the emergence of new strategies for playing the same game, particularly in the light



of continuous technological development. One clear aspect of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict is that military operations are now largely conducted through drones.

Recent actions by the United States against Iran have demonstrated to the world that the use of artificial intelligence in combat is no longer a matter of the future, but of the present. This development raises inherent ethical concerns, as the time available for decision-making by those who authorize attacks is significantly reduced, thereby increasing the likelihood of error. In this sense, the game continually renews itself through its own repetition.

Game Theory and Psychoanalysis

In light of what we have presented thus far, we can perceive the interpretive possibilities that game theory brings to psychoanalysis. We must attend to a fundamental difference between the two: game theory analyzes the conscious actions of players, whereas psychoanalysis is concerned with the unconscious and its manifestations. However, we cannot ignore their similarities. Jacques Lacan recognized the richness of these possibilities, engaging deeply with mathematics, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s, as Pierre Courtois and Tarik Tazdaït point out in *Jacques Lacan and Game Theory: An Early Contribution to Common Knowledge Reasoning* (2021). This influence appears most notably in Lacan's presentation of the "enigma of the three prisoners."

During the research group meeting that gave rise to this study, one of the main points of discussion of concerned cases of femicide, a phenomenon that has increased in Brazil in recent years. Over the past five years, the number of cases of gender-based violence in the country has risen significantly. According to the *Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública* (2026), there was a 4.7% increase between 2024 and 2025, with 1,568 victims recorded [6].

One of the points of discussion concerns the very possibility that many women recognize that they are in toxic relationships, in which they have already experienced violence (whether physical or emotional) and threats from their partners. However, a common complaint was that they believed their partners would not be capable of taking their lives. Many discontinued their analysis as a form of resistance, while others abandoned their treatment under the influence of third parties—often the partner himself. The psychoanalyst Luzia Carmem de Oliveira argues in her article *Feminicídio, observações a partir da psicanálise* (2023):

"For psychoanalysis, the understanding of this issue follows a different path from that of legal interpretation, leading us to consider categories such as identification, drive, love–hate, castration, object choice in love, jouissance, among other concepts. As a clinical praxis that privileges the singularity of the subject, psychoanalysis provides resources for interpreting culture and points to unconscious aspects or movements of subjectivity that are present in and constitutive of this type of event" [7, P. 26].

There is a set of elements that must be taken into consideration, one of which is the very interpretation of culture. In this sense, we must also analyze politics and wars. Moving from the macro to the micro level of human relations, especially in light of the intense polarization in which many countries find themselves, we can understand violence against women as a reflection of the broader escalation of violence in other spheres of human life. The author presents a case that is recurrent and widely recognized, not only by analysts but by any citizen. This case makes clear the existence of a tendency towards repetition, which constitutes a cycle of violence. She writes:

"In response to the question, 'What brings you here?', she does not hesitate to report that a few days earlier she had argued with her husband, and he had physically assaulted her, threatening to kill her in front of their children. This situation led her to leave the house and take refuge at a friend's home, without maintaining contact with him. However, after a few days, lacking the courage to file a complaint despite all the encouragement to do so, she decides to respond to his call and, at that moment, feels inclined to give him another chance, as he claims to be remorseful. **This was not the first time this had happened**" [7, P. 27].

Here, we can analyze part of this situation from the perspective of game theory. There is a game (the relationship) composed of two players. Within player A's (the husband's) set of actions, we find, for example, {to assault, to apologize}, while within player B's (the woman's) set of actions, we find {to flee, to forgive the assaults}. Although there exists a history between the players that clearly demonstrates a recurring cycle of violence, despite promises of change (that is, unreliable signals and the absence of punishment for breaking the "rules" of the game), player B remains in the game. Given the presence of incomplete information for player B (which, in dialogue with psychoanalysis, reflects the unpredictability inherent to the human being), the threats against her life may become a reality. These factors can influence or structure the payoffs (outcomes) of the game, that is, the motivations underlying the choices made by these players.

Table 1 - Table of possible payoffs

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<p>Player A: {Assault} = Control over his wife</p> <p>Player A: {Apologize} = Possibility of maintaining the relationship</p>
<p>Player B: {Flee} = Physical and emotional protection</p> <p>Player B: {Forgive} = Reduction of conflict, expectation of change, emotional dependence, and the costs of leaving the relationship</p>

This game constitutes a repeated game, characterized by incomplete information and a clear asymmetry of power between the players. As we have previously indicated, one player may use violence as a means of controlling the actions chosen by the other. Exiting this cycle of violence would require leaving the game altogether. However, for such a move to be carried out,



analytical work must take place, and the subject herself must come to recognize her situation. As the author suggests, a range of factors must be taken into account from a psychoanalytic perspective, including unconscious elements that may underlie the repetition of this cycle (game).

Conclusion

Despite their differences, game theory and psychoanalysis can establish a fruitful dialogue, particularly in the case of non-cooperative games. We can interpret their elements in a structurally similar manner. We emphasize the primary objective of both domains: players make conscious choices of action in games, while the unconscious expresses itself through its manifestations, both aiming at the most favorable or pleasurable outcome, respectively.

Players act according to their desires and intentions, seeking to maximize benefits and optimize their outcomes. The unconscious, through a series of manifestations (such as jokes, repetitions, and others), seeks pleasure, or *jouissance*, in the case of repetition. The proposed work has primarily aimed to establish the possibility of an interdisciplinary dialogue that allows us to think about the various human relationships in their different categories and complexities. Whether in romantic or simply interpersonal relations, or in economic and political ones, each type follows its own rules, objectives, and expected outcomes. Nevertheless, all of them are involved in a game, whether consciously or not.

Finally, as we have pointed out above, a myriad of possibilities can subvert the logic of the game, since these are human actions; in other words, games can change according to culture. We observe this in technological advances and in military operations, where actors increasingly aim to eliminate the greatest possible number of “enemies” in the shortest amount of time, from the construction of gas chambers by the Nazis during the World War II to the use of artificial intelligence in the location and bombardment of enemies with the aim of destroying human life, or, as stated by the current President of the United States, Donald Trump, “a whole civilization will die tonight” [12].

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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