Clausewitz and the canon? Remarks on the political theory of fighting

(Rough) Draft: no citation without permission.

"To sum up, a real "Clausewitzian" war is a war with unexpected developments, and this is not exactly what was announced, nor foreseen."

(Etienne Balibar, 2008. p. 377)

1. Introduction

In this paper I offer an exploratory account of the constitutive, generative character of war and its implications for political thought. A central claim is that this dimension of war, while often recognised, has been significantly under-theorised within the Western tradition. The paper suggests why this is the case and how under-theorisation is sustained through the 'decentering' of war. It goes on to offer an ontology of war which can account for its socially and politically generative character. This is achieved through a reading of Clausewitz's *On War* which positions him anew within a tradition in which he is frequently marginalised and suggests an ontological significance for his concept of 'fighting'. The implications of this ontology are explored first, for understandings of political violence and then, in conclusion, the ethics of war.

1.i. Between 'the problem of war' and the generative powers of war

War has repeatedly made, unmade and transformed political orders. A recurring context for world historical junctures and switchpoints, little in social and political life goes untouched by it. History offers a multitude of examples of its transformative, generative power. Consider the impact of women undertaking 'war work' on the politics of gender in European societies; the centrality of war and military symbolism in the construction of modern nationalisms; the role of military service in 'integrating' marginalised communities within national narratives; military competition as a driver for the formation of state school systems and the decline of church dominated curricula; the role of siegecraft, surveillance and command of strategic ground in the formation of cities and associated systems of expertise such as town planning, engineering and public architecture. Consider the constitutive interplay between barrack room and factory floor in enabling systems of industrial organisation and management. Consider further the

centrality of war and the threat of war in creating globally transformative technologies of travel and communication. And all of this before we rehearse more familiar narratives about the role of war in generating 'Westphalian' norms of territorial sovereignty and the role of military competition in consolidating modern state power, bureaucracy, centralised taxation and many other structures, knowledges and practices which define modern government. War is, I suggest, a socially and politically constitutive force almost beyond compare.[1]

And yet, as a survey of current university textbooks indicates - and as contemporary and past political theorists implicitly and explicitly demonstrate - the 'Problem of War' in Western political theory has been formulated almost exclusively in terms of the war-justice relation.[2] Looking at some recent teaching-oriented publication intended to introduce political theory, it is striking how infrequently war is discussed as anything other than a question of justice while also appearing as a periodising or 'contextualising' device to organise the history of political thought. Clohesy, Isaacs and Sparks' *Political Theorists in Context* for example, presents the canon of early-modern political theory in an opening section entitled 'The English Civil War'. The companion volume *Contemporary Political Theorists in Context* organises twentieth century thought into 'The Inter-War Debate'; 'Post-War Debates' and 'Contemporary Debates'. The implication of this structuring practice is that war marks a transformation of politics so radical that new debates emerge and new theoretical instruments are required. Yet sustained consideration of war in and of itself, the modality of such change, is absent.

1.ii. War, tradition and public reason

One outcome of the reduction of theorisation war to an issue of justice is that the question of what war *is* goes largely unconsidered (although a very recent return to this question by, amongst others, Etienne Balibar, is something I discuss below). This is a significant failing and not one limited to those concerned with the ethics of war. The absence of war as a subject of ontological enquiry - as something whose nature and defining character might be in question - is not evidence of its obscurity or difficulty as

1 Barkawi and Brighton, forthcoming.
2 For a recent example see Kochi, 2009, p. 4.

a subject. Rather, I suggest, it speaks of an issue already long decided. We might usefully trace this decision to the birth of the tradition and the opening *elenchus* of Plato's *Republic*. Here, a rearticulation of the relation between justice and power not only marks a founding moment in the idea of political community but also - relatedly - a decisive shift away from a Presocratic tradition which speculated about the relation of order to violence quite differently. Plato, in presenting the Republic and its consequences, has Socrates argue that:

> '[…] war and civil strife differ in nature as they do in name, according to the two spheres in which the two may arise: at home and abroad […] war means fighting with a foreign enemy; when the enemy is of the same kindred we call it civil strife'.[3]

In presenting war thus he enacts a determinate shift from the enframement offered in Hereclitus's Fragment 44:

> "War [*polemos*], as father of all things, and king, names few to serve as gods, and of the rest makes these men slaves, those free."[4]

The difference between the two is significant and offers a preliminary sense of the distinction through which the analysis below works. Plato's account of war explicitly removes it from the polity to the periphery where it becomes an activity through which relations with 'foreigners' are conducted: it assumes - thereby reasserts - a pre-existent political community and its potential for unity of action. The implication of Hereclitus's position however, is that war is properly understood as a constitutive force through which relations of power - including those very relations of interiority and exteriority, kin and foreigner, centre and periphery assumed in Plato's definition – can come into being in the first place. War then, is taken to be a constitutive force, not solely a relation of violence between predecided communities. This interpretation of Fragment 44 is not uncontested. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger

---

[3] 1990, 31.
[4] 2003, 29.

suggests:

> 'The *polemos* named here is a conflict that prevailed prior to everything divine and human, not a war in the human sense. This conflict, as Heraclitus thought it, first caused the realm of being to separate into opposites; it first gave rise to position and order and rank. In such separation cleavages, intervals, distances, and joints opened. In the conflict a world comes into being. (Conflict does not split, much less destroy unity, it is a binding-together, *logos*. *Polemos* and *logos* are the same).'[5]

War in Hereclitus's sense then, is for Heidegger simply an analogy for *logos*. Its constitutive power - the 'fathering' of social and political relations - represents being as becoming. In place of the particularity and contingency of actually existing wars, it is an aspect of the 'always already'. There are three relevant responses to this position. One, close to trite dismissal of Heidegger's philosophical position but nonetheless an interesting case study in war's historical relationship with academic discourse, is to place Heidegger's distancing of 'war in the human sense' from his own philosophical project in the context of a defence against accusations relating to his activities for the Nazi party. A second response is to mark the distance between Heidegger's interpretation of Fragment 44 and that offered by most scholars of Presocratic thought, for whom it is generally considered it a response to Homer's bemoaning of the devastation of Troy. A third, for which the second offers some justification and which I intend to pursue here, is to note the logic of Heidegger's observation - the intimate relation between *polemos* and *logos* - but to allow ourselves to speculate further about the relation between *logos* and 'war in the human sense' than he would appear comfortable with.

The meaning of *Logos* in Greek thought changes significantly between that assumed by Hereclitus - which as Heidegger suggests, is close to 'being' - and the later sense given it by Plato and Aristotle, both of whom presented it as something more akin to public reason. This is particularly important since, in the *Republic*, public reason is not something to be assumed but rather validated through argument: indeed, the argument of the *Republic* is intended to assert a particular arrangement of power as a

rationally justified order. This both reflected and enabled an ongoing transformation in Greek communal life in which, amongst other things, Plato's account of war can be situated. Its desired effect was to produce public reason of a far more meaningful, explicit and binding sort: a unifying principle for polity more potent than recognition of power or obedience to authority. Such a privileging of *Logos* as reason however, requires a multitude of exclusions and proscriptions. The momentum of 'rationalisation' requires, indeed - as Nietzsche and others have argued - necessarily operates through, a disciplinary account of what is irrational. It requires an absolute distinction between things as they are and, in Plato's analogy, mere shadows on the cave wall.

Critique of the Socratic turn from the perspective of what it excludes was a central theme in Nietzche's early masterwork *The Birth of Tragedy in the Spirit of Music*. Here, he described the impact of Socratic thought on Greek cosmology and art, charting the influence of rationalisation through shifting representations of the god Dionysus in tragic drama. In early tragedy Dionysus, the god of wine, represents loss of self, the immensity and uncontrollability of nature, an 'abyssal' universe animated by capricious gods with the power to devastate even the most powerful of human heroes. The 'truth' of Dionysus - Nietzsche's 'Dionysian principle' - is that we live in a world beyond our control which cannot be fully known, or represented, rationally. This was symbolised in early tragedy through Dionysus remaining offstage as a potent, unseen presence: an animating force, but not one that could be impersonated by an actor. This, for Nietzsche, indicated a culture for which art, tragic drama in particular, was a means of reconciliation with that which could not be known, understood or controlled and in which a relationship with 'the abyss of being' was a determinate part of communal consciousness. By witnessing, for example, the headstrong Oedipus discover he had unknowingly slept with his mother and killed his father the audience experiences a cathartic encounter with their own contingent, precarious existence and potential subjection to powers beyond their knowledge. It was a world in which the most brilliant of heroes could be made and then devastated by irresistable, uncontrolable forces. This tragic relationship with fate and nature, Nietzsche argued, was excluded with the rationalising spirit of Socrates. Euripides, for Nietzsche the most Socratic tragedian, brought Dionysus onstage and represented him, banalised, *rationalised*, alongside human

---

[5] 1959, 62.

protagonists. The potent, unknowable forces of the universe were to be rendered transparent, presumed susceptible to strategies of comprehensive representation.

We might fruitfully consider the related fates of Oedipus's father and Hereclitus' 'father of all' - war - when subject to the Socratic spirit of rationalisation. From the perspective of *tragedy*, Oedipus' action thrusts him into the abyss and he is devastated in ways death alone could never express. From the *rational* perspective he has simply made a mistake, albeit a dramatic one. His father, once a cosmological symbol of the devastating excess of being's power over knowing, becomes a character in a fable. Similarly, war as constitutive force - as a potentially unknowable, contingent decider of fate and maker of communal order - is forced to the periphery. In the Socratic polity, this war is necessarily subordinated to war as a strategic relation with those outside. To push the analogy further, in Euripidean tragedy the omnipotent presence of Dionysus was brought onto the stage, banalised and domesticated while at the same time, in Socratic philosophy, war was brought into the polity, governmentalised and domesticated, in the military rationality of the Guardians. All of this perhaps tells us something of a relation to our political and theoretical genealogy: that which determines us and the order of relations between us, whether we know it or not. Genealogy in the Nietzchean sense is both a structure of occlusion, of hidden origins, and an analytical activity that excavates those hidden determinacies and undoes their reification.

2. The political logics of decentering

What appears in this introductory, provisional account of the place of war in the birth of the tradition is the degree to which - like an invisible, capricious god - the powers of war to constitute and generate in contingent, unforseeable ways is significantly incommensurate with polity as site of public reason. It is incorporated as a special knowledge of the state and otherwise placed on the margins of political ontology, as a relation with a (predecided) other. That it might operate otherwise to make a social and political world that both precedes and acts upon rational decision-making directly contradicts the valorisation of reason itself. While the *Republic* remains a generative moment for the Western tradition, we find also a similar and reinforcing logic in the pacific assumptions of the European Enlightenment wherein civilization was constructed as a teleological process through which violence—barbarous, rude,

uncivil—was being removed from politics. More generally, rational inquiry and debate, embodied in the academy, were conceived as the very antithesis of force and as chief instruments in the progress of civility, a view elegantly restated by Habermas as the "forceless force of the better argument."

That this decentering of war is reflected in political thought should not surprise us, since polity as a site of public reason is both its core problematic and presumed field of intervention. Nonetheless attending to specific structures of decentering is, as I hope to show below, instructive. Moreover, the defining decision as to what war *is* in the *Republic*, while fundamental in the conceptualisation of war in the tradition, has never been sufficient. The ontological question recurs, not least because of the mutability of war and its repeated historical impacts: its refusal to remain on the periphery of political thought. We are arguably experiencing such a juncture at the time of writing. In a recent lecture, "What's in a war? (Politics as war, war as Politics)", Etienne Balibar offered an analysis of the current 'state of war' in the Middle East with an "epistemological discussion of the meaning and implications of the category 'war' itself" (Balibar, 2008. In addition to Balibar, see Steinhoff, 2009). There, he usefully positions his analysis in a relation of trepidatious uncertainty between, as he puts it, 'war' and 'the war'. His point is that the question 'what is war' is always to some extent asked under the duress imposed by contemporary warfare. So, we tend to ask as a matter of reflection 'what is war' because we are compelled as a matter of necessity to ask 'what is *this* war, *now*'? And there is an order of instrumental immediacy that - in ways I shall discuss below in reference to practical literatures of war - further decentres the question.

Another consequence of our suspension between 'war' and 'the war' is that we are required, for Balibar, to grapple with extent to which "war is, perhaps more than any other event, a situation which does not allow us the possibility of being neutral (or rather, with respect to which 'neutrality' is itself a judgment and a position" (2008, p. 366). In this regard, the decentering of war I have identified is the natural counterpart of the traditional emphasis on the war-justice relation in political thought. One effort to critically rework the war-justice relation, Tarik Kochi's *The Other's War: Recognition and the Violence of Ethics* begins, movingly, with an account of growing up in a Muslim family in Australia and being required to situate oneself in relation to a contradictory

legacy of militarised national identity and colonial violence.[6] I take the point to be that, even if born into contexts of peace, we already thrown into *and required to respond to* a world always-already constituted - at least in part - by war. But the question of justice is not the only possible response: indeed, not the only ethically and politically significant one. I return to the question of ethics and the war-justice relation in my concluding comment. For now, returning to and surveying the logics of decentering give us some sense of the stakes involved in this.

2.1. Decentering and order: war as archic principle

Archic principles are those that found the conception and practice of politics and political community. They refer to what Derrida termed the 'mystical origins' of political community: the founding event in reference to which the shared political life of a community becomes possible.[ref] There are two related senses in which war - and the idea of war - might function in this way. The first is through signifying the an-archic: the absence of the sovereign principle through which polity is founded. A basic organising principle in modern politics, the binary of sovereignty and anarchy found its most influential expression in Hobbes' vision of the state of nature as war waged by individuals amongst themselves without external mediation. Hobbes' state of nature presents war as anarchy: both the absence of sovereign power and the most basic referent for the legitimation of sovereign power. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes' central analytical category in describing war is time. War is not defined by 'Battell onely…', but rather the duration for which 'men live without without a common power to keep them all in awe […] wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known' [pp 185-186]. This form of time - duration without future - leaves individuals trapped in the present, atomised, without security, justice or property. War is thus the absence of future-oriented projects, shared labour and thus the greatest shared labour of all: polity. Passage from the time of war to that of peace is, in *Leviathan*, achieved through establishing the sovereign's legitimate power over life and death. The time of war is thus externalised: transcended by the Leviathan's subjects, it passes into relations between Sovereigns, whose stand in relation to one another 'as gladiators with daggers drawn', caught in perpetuity within a duration in which relations are shaped most

[6] 2009, pp. 1-19.

powerfully by 'the Will to contend by Battell'.

Clearly then, the notion of war is at the centre of Hobbes' account of polity and political life. It represents the an-archic condition through which the archic principle - the sovereign right over life and death - is legitimated. It is the basic referent that makes polity articulable. The features ascribed to it however - what war *is* for Hobbes - are clearly determined by the greater project of the *Leviathan*. War appears as a postulate in reference to which public reason becomes possible and is thus reduced to the service of that reason, appearing only as a foundational idea whose content is wholly shaped by the demands of that to be founded. War is invoked as little more than a legitimating abstraction. In this first sense of what might be called 'archic war' the de-centering of war can be grasped through recognising the contradictory relation between Hobbes' proclaimed logic - that the nature of war determines the sovereign order and thereby produces the polity - and the actual foundational logics of the Leviathan in which, conversely, the demands of polity determine what war comes to be as a moment of founding, such that war represents only a blank margin by and within which the inscription of polity is made possible.[7] Archic war in this first sense is a decentering though a profound abstraction wherein war becomes a signifier deriving content solely through the context of its utilisation.

This context, of course, was the emergent 'Westphalian' conventions of Hobbes' time and his own experience of the English Civil War. The archic function of war however, is not limited to the role Hobbes ascribes to it. It exists also - and this is the second sense of archic war - as a recurrent moment within the actual, historical lives of polities. Here, while sharing the foundational, enabling role of Hobbes' state of nature, the discursive operation of archic war is quite different. In place of the absence of shared labour war comes to symbolise the highest possibility of shared labour and, within a certain (by no means defunct) tradition of European nationalism, that of self-realisation. Here, in place of originary, primordial war, historic wars stand as waystations at which the symbolic resources of nationhood are generated.[8] This is not the place for a digression on contemporary nationalism: suffice it to observe the centrality of war both, on the one hand, within the 'blood and soil' tradition that saw the

[7] Cf foucault
[8] Howard, gellner - exceptions of germany, japan post 45 endnote

Milosovic regime's exhumation of King Lazar's bones and the invocation of the Field of Blackbirds at the outset of the Yugoslav war of dissolution and, on the other, the UK's post-colonial nationalism in which new monuments to the sacrifices of colonial and commonwealth troops in the second World War have emerged as a means to address mutually embroiled crises of military deployment overseas, 'failed multiculturalism' and the need for new referents for civic integration at home.[9]

Alongside Hobbes' originary time of war then, stands an historical time defined by the relation between state power, systems of social solidarity and the contingencies to which they are exposed. In this context, like Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the needs of real sovereigns to legitimate action inscribe themselves upon war - decide what war means and what it requires of 'us' here, now - in reference to the memorial wars of national narratives. Taken together, the two senses of archic war both produce the polity as a community of fate and a shared project. But they do so at the expense of a contentful, developed account of what war *is*, since their very functioning requires it to be an empty signifier, devoid of concrete meaning. While both stand as instances of war's constitutive function, neither by themselves offer resources through which to rigorously reflect upon war itself as a phenomenon and how these material and symbolic processes of constitution might be better understood.

2.2. Decentering and practice: strategy; polemology; revolution

If the archic function of war leaves war itself as a contentless signifier, one might expect to find a source of redress in the 'practical' or policy-oriented literatures of war: those advising warfighters or seeking understanding war in a manner that permits its conduct and control. There are broadly three traditions that engage war in this way: those of strategic theory and 'international security', the literatures of revolutionary war and, third, those 'conflict resolution' or 'conflict analysis' literatures largely associated with the diplomatic and interventionary projects of NGOs and international institutions. From the purposes of this paper these stand together and - while undisputedly diverse and rich in insight - present a common problem: they too analytically decentre war. Specifically, they divert from focussing upon war in itself as an outcome of their

[9] Brighton 2007; Barkawi and Brighton, forthcoming. Jay Winter's work interestingly presents the memorialisation of war post 1918 in terms of its being ever more inarticulable and unrepresentable – memorials becoming increasingly abstract as systems of representation.

instrumental concerns with the business of prevailing within or controlling it: their common focus on the management of armed force for the sake of a given objective. War as a phenomenon then, is engaged only in a limited manner and with a requirement to set aside that not of direct utility. A form of analytical 'tidying up', practical literatures share the function John Keegan attributed to military thought in the sense that, in order to enable action, they seek 'to make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive'.[10] This form of decentring is most obvious in the literatures of strategic theory and revolutionary war, where war is defined subject to practical requirement from 'above' and 'below', respectively. By way of illustration, Clausewitz's oft-cited 'dictum' that war is the continuation of politics with the addition of other means functions as a definition within the context of a strategic *appropriation* of war: specifically, a plea for war to be thought about and directed the standpoint of policy. The dictum thus concisely articulates a strategically enabling decentering of war - arguably the reason for its exulted status within positivist traditions of strategic thought. I argue below, however, that there are significant resources within Clausewitz's writings to contest the centrality of the dictum and - at the very least - dialectically position its direction by policy makers in constitutive relation to wider social and political forces.

While the relation between armed force and society have been secondary within positivist traditions of strategic theory, theorists of revolutionary war have attended to them more closely. Mao's observation that 'power grows out of the barrel of a gun' for example, was situated within analysis of the social organisation of local populations and an insistence that armed force was never separable from a wider programme of political engagement. While the enframent of war may be wider and the sociological dimensions of war as a phenomenon receive more consideration, however, war remains decentred through its instumentalisation. The analytical context Mao offered was most significantly concerned with securing 'the buttocks of the revolution', as he memorably described the popular foundation of revolutionary war.

Other approaches to war have sought to go beyond the narrow framework of its strategic application to provide a 'scientific' foundation from which war can be controlled. 'Polemological' theory offered by writers such as Quincy Wright (1942),

[10] 1976, pp. 18-19.

Gaston Bouthoul (1951) and Johan Galtung (1968) drew on demographic and other empirical research to trace patterns of causation and 'conflict processes'. Here again though, the approach taken to war is an instrumental one - albeit of a different sort to that found in strategic theory - which was ultimately to provide the foundation of 'peace research'. Its objective was to provide a foundation for new approaches to diplomacy and mediation that might control and eliminate actual and potential armed conflict or more generally, for Galtung, violence.[11] The result, while often based on historical survey, was a focus on contemporary and likely future conflict in which any account of the ontology of war was subservient to its practical utilisation. Galtung was explicit about this in his effort to define violence (of which he saw war as a subcategory). In approaching the 'unenviable task' of definition, he observed in the seminal essay 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', the requirement was not to provide '*the* definition or *the* typology' (emphases original) but rather to 'indicate theoretically significant dimensions of violence that can lead thinking, research and, potentially, action, towards the most important problems'[12] Thus the fundamental ontology of violence and by extension - in Galtung's schema - war, is not a central concern. It is decentred, secondary to the requirement of peace research and action.

3. The political ontology of fighting

A survey of this sort, while superficial, can indicate how war is ontologically decentred but also presents an opportunity to elaborate further on why this comes to be the case and the conceptual consequences that follow. We have seen how, in its Platonic enframement, war comes to be an interaction between political units: hence its being 'decentred' from the processes through which polities are constituted and reduced to a mode of engagement with 'foreigners'. Implicit in this decentering is an act of ontological relegation. Decentred, war becomes secondary: an epiphenomenon of more fundamental constititutive processes. Beginning from the conceptual foundation of 'classical' Hobbesian realism or later 'neorealist' theory for example, war in strategic theory is generally assumed to be an consequence of a political ontology comprising power-maximising, interest-defending political units competing under formal conditions

[11] Galtung 1969, pp. 78-102; Deutsch, 1970, pp. 474-477; Balibar, 2008, p. 371.
[12] 1969, pp. 79-80.

of anarchy. Separately but not dissimilarly, theorists of revolutionary war such as Mao have assumed its origins to lay in ontologically prior, causally anterior processes defined in terms of, for example, class conflict and the contradictions of capital. In both instances, war is understood as an outcome, not a cause, of other socio-political processes. It is, at most, a delivery system for political intentions and thereby a 'superior peace'. Alternatively, as for some eighteenth century theorists, war was a pathology generated by the politics of commercial competition between states, to be avoided by restructuring trade. Its capacity to play a generative and constitutive role in that taken to precede it becomes occluded. How this generative function might be understood - in terms its operation, limits and capacities - is now the question.

3.1. Fighting and historicity

While, as we have seen, war has generated literatures dedicated to it and serves as an organizing referent in others, few outside the specific fields of military thought and the 'conduct of war' school of military history offer sustained analyses of fighting. Fewer yet attempt to theorise it outside the instrumental register of military thought. This is at odds, first, with those few genuinely philosophical efforts to offer an ontology of war which tend to stress the definitive presence of fighting, or at least violence.[13] (The distinction will be returned to). Second, in strategic literatures, this absence further reflects the positivist abstraction of the Clausewitzian dictum from the argumentative context of Book I of *On War*, which stresses the duel-like nature of war, its inherent and necessary reciprocality and above all and necessarily, *Schlacht* (which is generally translated as battle but in the original German has connotations of slaughter and bloodshed). A further outcome of positivist readings of Clausewitz is that, when fighting is discussed and analysed, this tends to be limited to the 'kinetic exchange' between combatants and the immediate problems of managing and sustaining it. This is in no small regard an outcome of the historicity of war: our suspension between, in Balibar's formulation, 'war' and 'the war'. Insofar as we think about fighting, we do so in order to make sense of, prevail in, the fight we are in.

One work that describes the powerful instrumentalising influence of war on thought, notable even though its comments on war are almost incidental to its

[13] See for example, Stienhoff, 2009.

philosophical objectives, is Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas's work begins from the proposition that the proximity between war and knowing is fundamental, asking rhetorically whether or not "lucidity, the mind's openness on the true consist[s] in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?" such that "the trial by force is the test of the real", a point of vindication or failure for those who might speak truth about political reality. Thus far, the 'real' to which Levinas refers might be a Hobbesian realism, or the pragmatic reality of strategic analysts. But far from regarding the violence of war as a kinetic exchange, Levinas goes on to stress that it "does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves" in an "order from which no one can keep his distance".[14] The implication is that, while fighting remains a kinetic exchange, the Clausewitzian *Schlacht*, and the most fundamental element of war, it is simultaneously a process with the ability to draw in and disrupt wider certitudes and coordinates of human life, to shape and accelerate the transitory and mutable in human affairs: a "casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity . . . by an objective order from which there is no escape . . . ".[15]

This transformative power, the capacity to re-work the reality of social and political existence is, of course, the objective of waging war. War drives change and strategy is the science of its management. But Levinas's point (and the basis of his ethical intervention), is that, irrespective of their being rendered such in strategic calculus and destroyed as such in fighting, people and things are not only, or even primarily, strategic datum. Rather, while never completely reducible to such, they are bearers of meaning: manifestations of contemporary truth. They are by extension, products, outcomes and authors of social, political and cultural processes. Reinvested with full meaning, fighting marks the disruption of this wider order - the unmaking and remaking of certainties, of meaning and potentially, the coordinates of social and political life.

As the basic element of the ontology of war then, fighting drives the intellectual instrumentality of truth about war through its historicity and immediacy, but always exceeds the terms of that immediacy. This 'excess', the capacity of organised violence to

[14] 1969, pp. 21-2.
[15] Ibid.

be more than kinetic exchange, to 'cast into motion' subjects who are then alienated from themselves and come to remake themselves and the world in new ways, is both the centre of the ontology of war and that which gives war its status as an ontological event. From this critical standpoint it becomes possible to retain the ontological primacy of fighting, but wrest it from the instrumentality its historicity demands. Nonetheless, a fuller account of fighting itself – how it initiates the 'motion' Levinas speaks of to function generatively – still eludes us. For this, a fuller engagement with Clausewitz is necessary.

3.2 Fighting and knowing: Clausewitz's 'special problem'

In Book I of *On War*, Clausewitz expresses the tension between war in the universal and the particular – or as Balibar might put it, 'war' and 'the war' - through the metaphor of the "true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to a given case", going on to argue that as a "total phenomenon" war is "*more* than" this true chameleon.[16] This 'more than' is fundamental. More than a true chameleon, war's adaptation across time is not superficial, but more radical altogether – something Clausewitz suggests can be only fully captured within the historically contingent and constantly transforming 'trinity' of the people, government and military. Relations between each of these, "deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another", are liable to change such that pursuit of a fixed, transhistorical account is "totally useless".[17]

As a comment on the ontology of war, this statement might be taken to confirm the intimate, constitutive link between fighting, polity and society. As a statement of contingency and an expression of the limits of knowledge about war, it might superficially also be taken as secondary to the neater, more famous formulations of Book 1: war as "the pursuit of policy with the admixture of other means", as "duel", as "wrestling match." These after all, are taken to define his position, have attracted the approval of 'Clausewitzians' and provoked his critics to suggest Clausewitz's analytical utility has ceased. From the perspective of the ontology of war, however, are his remarks on uncertainty not equally the points at which Clausewitz tells us what war 'is'?

---

[16] 1993, p. 100-1.
[17] 1993, p. 101.

Answering this question properly requires us to recognize that *On War* proceeds along two separate but intimately linked analytical axes: that Clausewitz sought to write both as a *Kriegsakademie* instructor seeking to offer guidance to his students, colleagues and policy makers, and as philosopher of war whose primary concern was less instruction than interpretative, descriptive analysis. *On War* rests then, on a tension between the need to analyse war both strategically and as a phenomenon in itself. Thus, it seeks to produce certainties through identifying and methodically limiting uncertainties - viewing them instrumentally as a problem for the conduct of operations - and at the same time, recognises uncertainty itself is that which is most enduring, most *certain* in war. Positive dicta about what war is are consistently accompanied – positioned dialectically in relation to – qualifying comments about the role and centrality of uncertainty, the constant absence of comprehensive knowledge and, correspondingly, the importance of chance and luck.

We find then, I suggest, the following pedagogic structure in *On War*: Clausewitz presents fighting as an object of knowledge to which his reader relates directly as subject. This relation is active; it is, for the students of the *Kriegsakademie*, a matter of knowing and *doing*, of professional practice and success on the battlefield. But this immanent relation of subject and object is enframed within another relation of knowing: is *in itself* implicated in, a part of, the total phenomenon of war. The practical subject-object relation is thus part of the object with which we are presented. Clausewitz's analysis transcends the practical conduct of war and positions it within a more philosophically ambitious account of war that – although frequently subordinated to the offering of practical instruction – suggests both a theory of knowledge and political theory of fighting.

Sustaining this argument requires us to take seriously the idea that Clausewitz can be read as a philosopher rather than a strategic theorist. It requires first that we situate him within a tradition of German idealism that, at the time he wrote, had been transformed by the post-Kantian thought of Fichte and Hegel. The latter, in particular in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, had attempted to develop an account of knowledge – the historical particularity of subject-object relations – through a 'purely descriptive' method. That described was 'knowledge as a phenomenon' – '*das ersheinende Wissen*' – a phrase that, as Merold Westphal put it, contains an 'elegant ambiguity' in that it also

suggests knowledge *of* phenomenon.[18] The structure that emerges in the *Phenomenology* is one of successive, dialectically generated historical systems of understanding, the 'experiences' or 'education' of 'natural consciousness'. Natural consciousness was the name Hegel gave to knowledge in its historicity: its naïve condition prior to the transcendental subject of his own phenomenological method. It is that consciousness which - in finding its knowledge, self-perception and identity negated through contradictory conceptions and experiences - undergoes a period of doubt and despair in which its future form is determined.

Without elaborating too much further, there are significant continuities between the methodological commitment to description, the structure of historical knowledge and the experience of natural or naïve consciousness Hegel describes and several passages of Clausewitz's *On War*.[19] One of these is the chapter 'On Danger' in Book 1, which describes a novice soldier's experience as he moves from the rear to the front of a battlefield. This involves the successive shocks of escalating violence, the unexpected behavior of those around him, culminating in the sight of death and mutilation. It is a situation in which the naïve consciousness senses and must adapt to a situation in which 'ideas are governed by other factors [and] the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation'.[20]

This 'refraction' of reason, the breaking down of ordinary systems of knowledge and the need to constantly adapt to contingent, chaotic events, for Clausewitz, forms the core of fighting as it is actually experienced. This definitive element extends from the problem of theorizing war in general, to a proper understanding of the qualities required for command, to the challenge of providing advice on the actuality of the battlefield. Here, in fighting and the potential for fighting – the essentially activity of war – we find the point at which uncertainty is generated and ordinary rational certitudes undone. In battle and campaign, the only certainty is uncertainty and 'the general unreliability of all information' must be taken for granted. A recurrent theme in his efforts to describe war's basic nature is its resistance to and potential to disrupt

---

[18] 1990, pp. 8-9.
[19] I am currently attempting to research the nature and extent of Clausewitz's engagement with Hegel. English language commentary on this is very poor indeed: Michael Howard, for example, wrongly describes the intellectual structure of Clausewitz's theory as 'Platonic'. Azar Gat in his *History of Military Thought* doesn't mention Hegel at all in connection with Clausewitz, but mentions his being taught by a populariser of Kant.
[20] 1993, p. 133.

certainties. This presents 'a special problem in war' in that 'for lack of objective knowledge one has to trust to talent or to luck'.[21]

Taking uncertainty as a defining aspect of fighting rather than simply a practical problem, we can return to the insight gained from Levinas and begin to get a sense of how it might take on political significance. What is mobilized in fighting is more than simply the individuals who experience it as military assets: it is also the orders of public reason that they, as bearers of meaning and symbols of polity, are invested with. Fighting is an encounter in which orders of reason are put to a test for which there can be no certain outcome, and thereby place their authority and legitimacy at risk of practical destruction. At the very least, in undergoing the historical 'experience' (in Hegel's sense) of fighting, orders of public reason are opened up the possibility of uncertainty and a process of re-making in which the experience of war and authoritative narratives and discourses about it are subject to contestation and reassertion. The *political* significance being that fighting - as a fundamental element of the ontology of war - consists of an order of contingency, of unmaking and remaking, in which authority is at stake. Orders of public rationality are what stand to be unmade and remade. That this is the case implies that those orders already have investment in the capacity to conduct fighting, indeed to some degree must derive legitimacy from that capacity in the first place. While the rational polity thus places war on the periphery, decentered, it also manifests – is constituted – through a more fundamental relationship with war. The exercise of legitimated public reason requires an authoritative relation to violence, an authority tested in fighting, which is situated within a wider order of public reason.

4. Fighting contra violence

That uncertainty of outcome lays at the ontological entre of war as I have described it bears some similarity to the analysis offered by Hannah Arendt in her 'Reflections on Violence'. There, she suggests:

> "All violence harbours within itself an element of arbitrariness; nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more important role in human affairs than on the battlefield, and this intrusion of the 'Random Event' can be eliminated by no

[21] 1993, p. 161.

games theories but only by the certainty of mutual destruction."[22]

She also remarks, in another parallel to the analysis offered above, on the absence of serious, sustained theoretical attention to violence, the extent to which: 'violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all' such that "… what Sorel remarked sixty years ago, 'The problems of violence remain very obscure' is as true today as it was then".[23] The constitutive power of violence however, is something she quickly dismisses in reference to Sartre's rhetorical excesses in the introduction to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, in which violence is presented as the means by which colonized subjects can 'become men'. Fanon himself, in suggesting that for the colonized 'only violence pays' receives more sympathetic treatment, Arendt's position being that under certain circumstances violence may pay but - because of its essentially arbitrary outcomes - it is always unclear what the currency of that payment will be. This, she argues, is because 'violence' is fundamentally distinct from 'power'. The latter 'is [...] of the essence of all government' and '[...] springs up whenever people get together and act in concert', deriving legitimacy from 'the initial getting together rather than from any action that may then follow.'[24] From the perspective of politics this distinction between power and violence is absolute: they are 'opposites; where the one rules absolutely the other is absent' such that '[t]o speak of non-violent power is redundant'. Power then, derives from solidarity, a consensual 'command-obedience relation' founded on the continuity between the command and the 'opinion' of the commanded. Here we clearly being presented with a vision of public reason, the functioning of a rational polity, in which – like the *Republic* – violence is peripheral to the logics of order. Thus against Mao for example, Arendt is able to argue that 'Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power'.[25]

A central implication of the political theory of fighting outlined above is that this position, the absolute separation of violence from power, becomes unsustainable. There are several ways in which this is the case. To begin with, we might focus on the degree

[22] In Bestman (ed.) 2002, p. 20, p. 26.
[23] 2002, 20.
[24] 2002, pp. 31-2.

to which, while rarely explicit, power is legitimated through its rational command of violence. The military art of the Guardians is both part of the legitimation of the order of power and a means by which violence is excluded from public reason. The passivity and consent of the 'commanded' thus derives in part from the commanders rational, skillful capacity for fighting in the name of the order of public reason in which they are invested and which is invested in them. In a more historical register we might note how the 'acting together and in concert' Arendt takes to be indicative of power has been most marked - in scale, intensity and frequency - in times of war. In this regard, the legitimation of power has also come to rest in the ability of political leaders to present themselves as worthy inheritors of national, martial traditions. Moments of militarized solidarity are frequently the basic grammar of collective, national memory even if, as Kochi suggest, this inheritance is shot through with ethical contradictions and ambiguities. They have been symbolically central to the interarticaltion of social solidarity, public reason and political authority.

The presence of violence *in* power is something Arendt is unable to escape even her effort to do so. She discusses for example, how it is that regimes of power are able to continue existing even when 'utterly impotent' because no one 'tests their strength'.[26] Implicit here is a distinction between the regime as a site of power which is other than 'strength' - violence and the means to exercise it - and yet is *testable* through a trial of strength. How can such a distinction be explicable without their being some other relation between violence and power than former being an instrument of the latter? Put otherwise: what is it that exists in a powerless regime that nonetheless allows it to subsist until its power is tested and found to be absent? To identify this absence as 'the illusion of power' is an ahistorical simplification. Instead it might be seen as the discursive remainder of past power. What stays on is the investment in the possession of power, the presentation of power as an element of polity, of a relation to power that allows subjects to remain obedient regardless of whether that power has material force. This not to suggest power and violence are the same, but to note that command of violence is an element in the realisation of power and many diverse elements of power have their origin in – or constituted through - the many diverse elements of war.

---

[25] Ibid, p. 32.
[26] 2002, p. 30.

Definitive aspects of power then, to paraphrase Foucault, 'refer to the sword'. 'Fighting', as an activity which mobilizes and tests orders of public reason, presents us with a complex interrelation between those orders and the activity of violence, one which permits a greater descriptive purchase on the actual operation of power than Arendt offers. Nonetheless, the 'arbitrariness' of the outcome of violence she identifies still resonates with the contingency of fighting as I have presented it – the consequnce of war is a space of possibility in which old certitudes and the content of public reason are potentially placed in question. In this regard, the political theory of fighting retains the meaning of violence in Arendt's sense, but suggests a more complex – potentially more rewarding – field of contestation.

Conclusion: ethics and the political theory of fighting

There is, I suggest, a burgeoning historical irresponsibility involved in the decentering of war. As an intellectual procedure, the act of decentering allows the generative processes which brought our world into being to disappear and their outcomes, reified, to be traduced unproblematically into civil orders from which war is exteriorized: only the technical knowledges of strategy and the symbolic totems of identity remaining within public reason. This 'othering' of war from the institutions and frameworks of northern, western societies are part of the means through which war becomes a property of the outside - alien to zones of 'liberal peace'.[27] The extent to which that peace is now called into question by the structural and political connectivities between 'insurgencies' outside it and 'terrorism' within it alone testifies to the unsustainability of this externalisation. If we are now required to 're-centre' war, it is not least because in September 2001 and subsequently, wars of peripheral order came to the metropole. War has recentered itself.

To adequately think war at the centre however, means tracing its path to the periphery as I have sought to do here, and to suggest how it might be centred critically, in new ways. In offering a political theory of fighting I have sought to show the centrality of war to orders of public reason that operate as if it were constantly at the periphery, a matter of 'others' and how we operate in relation to them. I have also suggested that, at the heart of fighting is an opening, a 'determinate negation' within

[27] I take the term from Barkawi and Laffey, 2006.

orders of rationality that – at least potentially - presents a field of contestation and opportunity. This is the field, I suggest, for an effective ethics of war.

To show how this might be the case, I refer again to Arendt's work. In an essay called 'Between past and future' she discusses a line from a poem by René Char in which he reflects on his final days as a resistance fighter during the Second World War. '[O]ur inheritance' Char wrote, 'was left to us without testament'. For Arendt, this 'inheritance' was an unrealised 'gift' revealed in Char's sense of impending loss as war ended and liberation approached. This inheritance made itself known in negative form: —'without testament'— as he contemplated returning to 'a private life centred about nothing but itself' and the 'weightless irrelevance' of a political world no longer marked by personal engagement or responsibility. While Char responded to this experience by asking how best to exercise a willful dislocation: '[…] break with the aroma of these essential years, silently reject (not repress) my treasure', Arendt sought the meaning of this 'odd in-between time' and what it revealed about the type of political and historic juncture he described.[28]

Without proceeding further with Arendt's analysis, I wish to share her recognition of the significance of Char's 'inheritance without testament'. The experience of war, the implication is, does not 'speak' and is not self-evident as an order of truth. The passage of that experience into language, and thereby public reason, is a creative, constitutive process that is undertaken subsequently. This is perhaps the most important sense in which war is a generative force. Fighting opens up a sphere of arbitrariness, of problematised rationalities, of discourse-in-formation that demand generative activity – even if only reiterative of old, reactionary verities. The experience of war then, passes into an order of truth and public reason through a process of construction. Because it is a complex experience in which the forms of public rationality involved are many, this generative process takes many forms and – to be engaged effectively – suggests many necessary fields of intervention. Such intervention requires a broader, more through account of the processes of generation that war initiates and this is necessarily predicated on an ontology of war which accounts for its plurality as a generative force. I offer the above as a provisional step in doing so. It is an ethical comportment which resists the temporally specific ontology of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in*

[28] 1993, pp. 1-15.

bello: in place of 'pre-war' consideration of just cause and 'wartime' consideration of just conduct, the time for intervention is always *now* since war is inseparable from the time of polity. This is not to suggest that - if we accept that war is 'father of all' in Hereclitus's sense - we must critically engage 'all' without distinction, rather it is to stress (as he does) that all is situated within an order of war-constituted power.