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I confirm that this essay is written in my own words and is the result of my own work. All sources used have been acknowledged in the essay. – Gergely Bérce

August 16, 2018

Is War an Inevitable Feature of Modern Politics?

We love to philosophize over world peace almost as much as we do about Armageddon – to similar result. As with the End Times, intellectuals, prophets, and leaders promised world peace again and again if only we would follow their prescriptions. Upon the very inception of modern history, the demiurge Ptah encouraged Ramses II to follow his advice so that all his enemies would “come to thee, crying out together, to crave peace.”¹ The trend of world peace prophecies hit the ground running, powering itself into modernity at full speed. Despite Marxist theorist Leon Trotsky’s proletariat world revolution, Ayn Rand’s laissez-faire capitalist utopia underscored by Economics Norms Theory, or the United Nations optimistic agenda for “peace in the world”, war remains at large.^{2,3,4} In 2016, state-based conflicts alone claimed almost 100,000 lives, while U.S. special operations have already carried out missions in 133 countries this year – all to the ominous ticking of the Doomsday Clock taking us closer to the midnight of terminal disaster as concerns rise over nuclear war making the world “as dangerous as it has been since World War II.”^{5,6,7} And, so, the question stands, is war an inevitable feature of modern politics? The answer is yes. War is an inevitable feature of modern politics due to its integrality to the nation state, and the global economy which, when coupled with exacerbating elements of human nature itself, constitute an unshakable superstructure based in war.

Before embarking on our journey to explore the inevitability of war, we must identify the boundaries of our expedition: those of modern politics. The definition of politics itself remains elusive, not helped by different forms of government, culture, and ideology often expressing the concept of the political in clashing terms. For the purpose of this essay, however, the Cambridge Dictionary’s take on the matter should suffice: “the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed.”⁸ Nonetheless, we face similar hurdles with the definition of *modern*, there existing numerous dates across various intellectual traditions understood to signal the modern era’s beginning. And then we are not even at the reconciliation of the two terms that would give us a framework within which to investigate the inevitability of war. For the sake of functionality, this essay will maintain a level of ambiguity around modern politics, opting for C.L.R James’s open demarcation of the concept as a “tremendous battle to find a form of government which reproduces, on a more highly developed economic level, the relationship between the individual and the

community”, much of which has to do with war’s inextricability from the nation state and the global financial system, as will be shown.⁹

Within the context of modern politics, war exhibits a dualistic paradigm consisting of an on-ground reality as well as a metaphor for an amalgam of political activities. Nineteenth century general Carl von Clausewitz noted that war “is not an independent phenomenon, but the continuation of politics by different means.”¹⁰ Indeed, the Prussian general agonized a great deal over the deleterious interplay between the military and political spheres when, in reality, war is merely a “continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means.”¹¹ Nevertheless, we can go beyond war as a monolithic extension of political activities, identifying a dualism. On the one hand, we have a relatively clear idea of war as “armed fighting between two or more countries or groups”, but this definition only satisfies half of the dualistic paradigm of war as it exists in modern politics.¹² To complement it, we also have to account for the metaphor of war that is independent of the realities of organized violence while remaining a distinct feature of politics employed as rhetoric to garner public support for various causes. As with any dualism, understanding the interaction between war’s two components proves key to determining its true nature.

The reality and metaphor of war exist in strong synergy, actuating one another despite the attempts of modern political actors to separate the two. When rhetoric and military action coincide, the results are what we might call normative wars, marked by mass mobilization, state propaganda, and large-scale organized violence. One prominent example of a calculated normative war is the Gulf War where, according to linguist and philosopher George Lakoff, the U.S. government justified the conclusions of a “cost benefit analysis” to go to war with the promulgation of “metaphorical thought” to advance its geopolitical interests.¹³ Here, metaphors such as Saddam Hussein “sitting on our economic lifeline” served as a necessary catalyst for the reality of the Gulf War. However, states also engage in just one element of war independently only to inadvertently instigate the other.¹⁴ President Obama’s drone campaign in Pakistan provides a perfect exposé of initiatives intended solely to actuate the reality of war inevitably spawning political metaphor as actors attempt to justify their otherwise callous, game theoretic motivations. Despite initial promises to “step back from the rhetoric and much of the Bush administration policy”, professor in Politics and International Studies Trevor McCrisken concludes that the Obama administration’s “rhetoric has been reconstituted as the actions of his policy have unfolded”, falling back to the patriotic patois of the War on Terror – excellently exemplified by Osama bin Laden’s highly publicized killing – upon Human Rights violation allegations.¹⁵ Conversely, overt dissemination of the war metaphor without the intention to spark actual organized violence can very well boil over into armed conflict, too. The Incident at Petrich, otherwise labelled the War of the Stray Dog, stands infamous testament to this trend, where the overt dissemination of nationalism and the contingency of history brought about the deaths of over a hundred soldiers and civilians despite the intentions of the belligerent Greek and Bulgarian governments to merely justify their own existence in opposition to one another. Therefore, the waging of war, or the promulgation of its metaphor on their own, serve the interests of modern political actors by intention, but readily boil over to actuate the other respective half of the dualistic paradigm.

At its core, the modern state upholds its existence and guarantees its myriad functions through the constant internal threat of war and the construction of a national identity to uphold this inherently violent *modus operandi*. Max Weber recognized this praxis, leading to his definition of the state as the "only human *Gemeinschaft* [community] which lays claim to the monopoly on the legitimated use of physical force."¹⁶ Without the omnipresent threat of war to undergird the legitimacy of the state, governments, even democratic ones, would lack the means to enforce their policies – at which point they cease to exist. Late Civil Rights activist Kwame Ture's rhetorical question speaks to this point perfectly: "Is it not violent for a child to go to bed hungry in the richest country in the world?"¹⁷ Were the children to reject the legitimacy of the status quo presiding over their hunger, they would be faced with the legitimate violence of the state – hence they starve. Furthermore, the authorities' forever wars for self-legitimization become inextricably intertwined with politics in the modern era. This occurs due to the displacement of the religious by the political as the fountainhead of group identity. Indeed, political theorist Carl Schmidt treats politics as a form of secularized religion which, in turn, necessitates the unceasing maintenance of what he calls the "friend/enemy distinction" which replaces religions' sacred/profane distinction quintessential to building a functioning, homogenous society able to resolve internal conflicts.¹⁸ Because war supersedes all other concerns in politics, it becomes the veritable trump card of all political discourse. Schmidt viewed his own work as a mere idealization of the modern state, however, Giorgio Agamben asserts that, truly, the "state of exception" (first conceptualized by Schmidt in tandem with the friend/enemy distinction) has become the paradigmatic form of government. The modern political state achieves this through an "unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" – a "fictio iuris par excellence" that allows government action, "whether human, bestial, or divine," to "lie beyond the sphere of the law."¹⁹ Noam Chomsky's approach to war, more specifically the incessant metaphorical calls to "support our troops", echoes Agamben's analysis, holding that it is a meaningless slogan that "diverts your attention from a question that means something: do you support our policy? – and that's the one you're not allowed to talk about."²⁰ Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky takes a similar stance, equating "the totality of political actions undertaken by the working class since the 1860's" with a "war of attrition" where the "preconstituted identity" of the proletariat and bourgeoisie clash over a "prefixed line of development" which "gives directional tendency to their struggle."²¹ Thus, in its modern political function internal to the state, war has become an infinite metaphor for all state action.

As discussed previously, the metaphor of war has a proclivity to boil over into the reality of organized violence. Similarly, the paradigmatic state of exception driving the internal functions of modern politics externalizes itself in international and inter-societal relations, driving us towards war. The ancient tribe's identity was defined by its Gods. Modern tribalism, on the other hand, has its roots in a more complicated process of political identity displacing God. Terror management theory, first proposed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, centers the entire spectrum of human behavior around staving off the fear of inevitable and unpredictable death.²² To this end, we create culture. Instead of Emile Durkheim's religious arbiter of sacred and profane, today's cultures are driven by modern political identity where, as Schmidt argues, we inevitably war against anyone deemed "other" as a necessary component of

self-realization.^{23,24} A study conducted by Markus V. Höhnev, published in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, supports this, concluding that “political identities” are “both a product of and a driving force behind political and military conflict.”²⁵ Furthermore, the clash of political identities can also facilitate fissures within nations, such as the Culture Wars raging in the United States where voters are reporting that poll losses “produce an all-encompassing sense of despair”, which is reminiscent of Mitt Romney supporter Marianne Doherty’s claim after the 2012 presidential elections that she had “lost touch with what the identity of America is.”²⁶ Commensurate with terror management theory, the negation of political identity has led Americans to engage in the metaphorical Culture Wars that has fortunately not boiled over into real armed conflict as it did in the 19th century when the extension of slavery to new states became so integral to politics as to spark the Civil War. Nevertheless, we can still observe the war metaphor in play as it drives not only countries to go to war, but societies apart into competing tribes as their identities depend on the negation of everything deemed other in an exercise verging on the existential.

Besides war’s desideratum to the state, new modes of government and societal competition align modern politics directly with war. For the majority of human history, the war metaphor underlying identity could easily escalate into large scale organized violence. However, the nuclear deterrent, “international legal constraints,” and “declining appetite for violence of relatively prosperous middle classes” make this type of war “extremely rare,” with nearly all armed conflicts since 1946 having been interstate according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.²⁷ Instead, the new normative has become what Mark Galeotti of the Institute of International Relations in Prague describes as “guerrilla geopolitics” characterized by cyber-attacks, “propaganda and subversion, economic blackmail and sabotage, sponsorship of proxy forces and creeping military expansionism.”²⁸ Accordingly, the Council on Foreign Relations urges the United States to adopt a new military strategy “and call it by its rightful but long-neglected name: political warfare” in response to the “multifaceted struggle over identity, power, and authority that pits moderates against extremists, but also tribe against tribe and ethnic groups against the state.”²⁹ Meanwhile, Russia’s recently-adopted Gerasimov Doctrine operates on the belief that nonmilitary tools in conflict zones prove four times more effective in achieving objectives than conventional weapons.³⁰ A 2015 U.S. Special Operations Command report draws a similar picture of the Chinese strategy of “Three Warfares” where “media warfare seeks to influence domestic and international public opinion to build support for military actions and dissuade adversaries from actions contrary to China’s interests,” even as legal warfare “uses international and domestic law to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests.”³¹ To remain relevant in an era of political warfare, RAND Corporation makes a number of recommendations to the U.S. government, urging, amongst others, the maintenance of “collaborative relationships” between military commanders and “their civilian counterparts through regular visits and frequent communications,” the expansion of capabilities to undertake “information operations” to be aided by “increased manpower and new media training,” and the identification of “critical information requirements for political warfare threats.”³² At a glance, RAND Corporation’s proposals seem harmless, but in essence they amount to a call for the complete militarization of society for the current information war, resulting in a draft of all citizens whose minds are not only the soldiers of political warfare but its battlefields, too.

We can identify a similar internal-external dichotomy in the role of war to the facilitation of the economy. Internally, the propagation of the war metaphor by the modern political machine proves indispensable to the development of the next phase of the high technology economy. Historically, the overwhelming majority of technological breakthroughs of the modern era were, and continue to be, products of Western military investment. We learned to harness nuclear energy from the Manhattan Project; the source from where this information is most readily obtainable, and which is the focus of modern communications and consumerism, is the internet, whose development sprung directly from U.S. Department of Defense contractors working on ARPANET; the first computer, ENIAC, was designed to calculate artillery firing tables by the United States Army's Ballistic Research Laboratory and to explore the feasibility of thermonuclear weapons development, while highly unprofitable research and development projects were buoyed by military acquisitions before eventual commercialization. Other ubiquitous technologies developed from military funding and subsequently commercialized include the GPS, digital cameras, microwaves, aviator sunglasses, and passenger airliners (modified bombers essentially).³³ By the late 1960s, concerns over the military industrial complex's monopoly over research and development led to the passage of the Mansfield Amendment to the Military Authorization Act for the 1970 fiscal year prohibiting the Department of Defense from using its funds "to carry out any research project or study unless such project or study has a direct and apparent relationship to a specific military function." However, the amendment catalyzed little perceptible change. The National Science Foundation admits that it "did not otherwise expand" as a result of it, while laboratories and businesses running on the defense budget only take greater pains to conceive military applications for their research as they continue to benefit from generous military funding that saw the Pentagon award \$304 billion to private corporations during the 2016 fiscal year alone.^{34,35} To this day, MIT conducts research in space warfare, chemical and biological weapons, and combat drone technology, even as it continues to turn out groundbreaking cancer medication and next-generation electronics – financed all from the same funding pool.³⁶ Of course, constant defense spending hikes require justification, and they can only be of a single kind: impending war. During the Cold War, the United States grossly exaggerated Soviet military capabilities to spike defense spending, and, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Bush administration warned of "the technological sophistication of third world powers" to maintain a high military budget.^{37,38} Michael Salter of Western Sydney University goes as far as to identify a "fetishisation" of military technology as a complementary phenomenon "to crucial shifts in the social and economic order" promulgated to legitimate "the militarised masculine subject positions of paramilitary policing specifically and the neoliberal state generally." The state of exception as a paradigm of government provides a ready explanatory framework for defense spending patterns in light of President Trump's new national security strategy that, according to *The National Interest*, "makes a subtle, but important point—namely, that there no longer exist true periods of peace."³⁹ The unceasing need to innovate necessitates unceasing war.

The inherency of war to the modern economy also externalizes itself as an international regulatory mechanism. In his book, *The Global Minotaur*, Yanis Varoufakis argues that the post-WWII realization that the "war liberated state finances from all political constraints" lead to the

institution of a new global economic order whose “finest hour came” when “the policy makers of the strongest political union on the planet decided to play a hegemonic role” involving the exercise of “military and political might.”⁴⁰ The demise of this comparably peaceful “Global Plan” gave birth to the rise of the “Global Minotaur,” a monster of the U.S. private sector whose success “could only be achieved if the American military was allowed to project its power to the four corners of the planet.”⁴¹ In his commentary on Varoufakis’ work, Slavoj Žižek calls the existing economic world order a “Universal Sparta” made up of three worlds alike the ancient Greek polis’ social structure.⁴² In similar fashion to the Spartan ruling caste’s existential reliance on helot agriculture, Žižek presents the U.S. as a “nonproductive predator” needing to “suck up 1 billion dollars daily influx from other nations” to stave off economic collapse.⁴³ This “permanent transfer of wealth” is guaranteed by the First World’s hegemony that, in turn, depends on an “ideological and military” trust in the U.S. and her allies, necessitating a “permanent state of war” to “justify its imperial role.”⁴⁴ In the fashion of the Sparta’s annual pro forma declaration of war on the helot population, the First World invented the War on Terror to squash any alternatives to the global economic framework guaranteeing its hegemonic existence. Accordingly, David Keen argues in his 2006 book, presciently titled *Endless War?*, that “[c]apitalism and the ‘war on terror’ not only help to sustain one another but they have this in common: they worship success but are nourished by failure.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, military support for the existing economic order is not limited to the War on Terror. Dawn Paley, journalist and author of *Drug War Capitalism*, asserts in an article published by political website openDemocracy that the “state policies, under cover of an anti-narcotics struggle,” result in “terrifying violence [that] overwhelmingly favors transnational corporations,” providing a perfect exposé of the convergence of war’s metaphor and reality to support economic interests.⁴⁶ We can also identify an even more direct intersection of the war metaphor and economics in President Trump’s repeated calls for a “Trade War,” harnessing war’s mobilizing potential to extract support for state policies from the population while obscuring complex, unpopular truths, such as the fact that the majority of the financial burden of retaliatory tariffs will be borne by his Republican base.⁴⁷

In addition to war’s structural inherency in modern politics through the global economy and the nation state, our very human nature drives conflict between societies through the strength of metaphor which, as has been argued, tends to actuate real organized violence. The Hobbes-Rousseau debate has raged on for centuries, its battles fought across numerous academic disciplines without a clear winner. Indeed, science has so far failed to conclusively link war to evolutionary processes. Fortunately, within the context of modern politics we do not require such a proof. Instead, we need only identify contemporary genetic and cultural factors that imbue us with an unshakable, irresistible inclination towards war, or at least its metaphor. Evidence of the latter litters our culture, with “the calendars of nations” “punctuated by holidays to celebrate wars won and to perform memorial services for those who died waging them.”⁴⁸ We have waged war in the past, cemented its memory in our collective consciousness, thereby codifying it in our human nature. In fact, culture remains one of the centerpieces of modern politics – so much so that we wage wars over it. In another vein, Edward Osborne Wilson provides a biological argument for our proclivity towards war in politics, arguing that “[p]ublic support is best fired up by appeal to the emotions of deadly combat, over which the amygdala—a center for primary emotion in the brain—is grandmaster.”⁴⁹ Moreover, “[h]umans are inherently social”, the Journal

of Psychiatry and Neuroscience proves the claim first advanced by Aristotle.⁵⁰ The political implication of human sociability is a genetic drive towards the kind of mass association that leads to the rise of terror managing group identities, manifesting at large in the form of nation states defined by the friend/enemy distinction that, in turn, leads to the state of exception as the paradigmatic form of modern government.

The above sectors to whom war is integral exist in strong synergy with one another to constitute a modern political superstructure, putting the lid on the coffin of world peace fantasies. “War is life in extremis,” William James writes in his famous 1906 antiwar essay, going on to point out that “war taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay, as the budgets of all nations show us.”⁵¹ And “the architects of policy,” the modern equivalents of Adam Smith’s “merchants and manufacturers” who, today, reside in a state sector “very closely linked to concentrated private capital,” are in desperate need of tax revenue and public acquiescence to their policies.⁵² This should come as no surprise in light of Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page’s study reporting that, in the U.S., the public opinion of the bottom 90% has no impact on policy even while the “net alignments of the most influential, business-oriented groups are negatively related to the average citizen’s wishes,” one prominent example being billions of dollars’ worth of “implicit public subsidies” to the financial system in both the U.S. and the Eurozone.^{53,54} We find a similar situation in most other countries, all but 20 of whom score lower on the democracy index than the United States.⁵⁵ In fact, top level policy advisors have actively called for a moderation of democracy in the past, as the Trilateral Commission did in its incongruously titled 1975 book, *The Crisis of Democracy*, while Wolfgang Schauble, sitting president of the Bundestag, frankly stated during a round of Eurogroup negotiations that “Elections cannot be allowed to change economic policy.”^{56,57} This status quo imposes itself on the international stage, too, as the clashing interests of ruling elites drag indoctrinated citizenries along into trade wars and armed conflicts that they are all too content to fight because it reinforces their terror managing group identities. Moreover, our human responsiveness to the metaphor of war results in the purported opponents of the existing superstructure becoming willing components of it as well. Indeed, for Marxists, arguably the most significant enemies of the modern status quo, “the consolidation of classes as historical forces cemented by a 'political idea' is reliant upon their confrontation with opposing forces,” with Georges Sorel starkly posits war as “the condition of the working class.”⁵⁸

William James’s call for “war against war” echoes our predicament as the state, based in antagonistic group identity, coalesces with exploitative globalized national economies to channel our very human natures into an inevitable feature of a modern political superstructure based in war.⁵⁹ Instead of despairing, however, we ought to consider David W. Orr’s words (falsely attributed to the Dalai Lama): The planet needs “more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind.” A capable doctor accepts the inevitability of death while doing everything to stave it off; a good teacher appreciates the inevitability of ignorance while doing everything to spread knowledge; and so, we, too, must recognize the inevitability of war with all its associated horrors and deceptions even as we work tirelessly towards a peaceful, prosperous, and truthful future.

Word Count Excepting Citations: 3982

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