Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique[1]

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This paper approaches the ontology of war by asking why, despite its constitutive function for politics and society, has war never been made the object of an academic discipline? Through an analysis of the relationship between war and knowledge about war, we argue that the ontology of war is such that it disrupts foundational claims of the kind necessary for conventional forms of academic disciplinarity. At the center of the ontology of war is *fighting*, an idea we recover from Clausewitz. A moment of radical contingency, fighting both compromises knowledge about war and forces the unmaking and remaking of social and political orders. These generative powers of war operate through the production of systems of knowledge and their institutionalization in the academy, the state and wider society. Although of existential significance for political authority, these knowledges are vulnerable to the very contingency of war that produces them. This complex of relations between war, knowledge, and power we term War/Truth. As such, an analytical framework adequate to war requires a reflexive relation to truth claims. We clear the ground for such a ''critical war studies.''

''War, as father
of all things, and king,
names few
to serve as gods,
and of the rest makes
these men slaves,
those free.''
                         –Heraclitus (2003:29)

While destructive, war is a generative force like no other. It is of fundamental significance for politics, society, and culture. War occupies historic junctures and switchpoints, the birth and demise of eras. War, the threat of war, and the preparation for war mark the origins, transformation, and end of polities.

There is little in social life not touched by war, as its presence in the spheres of gender, economy, and technology indicates. Why then does the Anglo-American academy lack a discipline of ''war studies''? Might consideration of this question uncover something important about war and about its relations with politics? In this paper, we reflect on the character of war, on the one hand, and truths about it in politics and inquiry, on the other. We argue that war's fundamental properties are in part revealed by its disordering and reordering of knowledge. War's powers work through connections between war and knowledge and through political investments in truths about war. More broadly, we help lay the basis for a long overdue and much needed critical engagement with war. With exception, war's operations in culture, society, and politics go unrecognized because the social and critical theory of war is underdeveloped. We help redress this situation by providing a framework for inquiry into war.

That there is no discipline of war studies might be taken to indicate that war is not an overly challenging object of inquiry. That, in fact, the fundamental character of war is sufficiently expressed in common sense understandings. We argue that this presumption that war is known is paradoxically sustained through the decentering of war as an object of inquiry. The first section below on the absence of war studies makes good on this claim by tracing the displacement of war in the development of modern university disciplines. We show that war is not the central object of any discipline; that the ''interdisciplinary'' study of war does not compensate for this lack; and that despite profoundly insightful efforts to the contrary, the idea of a war studies has not been sufficiently elaborated either intellectually or institutionally.

War, then, is in the situation of being both taken for granted in its meaning and radically underdeveloped as an object of inquiry. It is only in the wake of this realization that we can see that, in contrast to disciplinary objects such as politics or economy, the most basic questions regarding the ontology and epistemology of war have hardly been asked, much less have they issued in a substantial body of theory. In the second, reconstructive half of the paper we account for this disordered state of knowledge about war and provide a basis for a new analytic departure. Beginning with a recovery of Clausewitz's idea of ''fighting,'' we theorize war's generative powers initially through an account of uncertainty and contingency on the battlefield. We then show how this uncertainty comes to be decisive not only for academic knowledges but also for culture, society, and politics through its disruptive effects on orders of public reason and the social identities they sustain. Given the centrality of war for politics, the field of contingency generated by war's most distinctive activity both disrupts settled narratives and drives their remaking.

A dynamic arises between efforts to impose certitudes on war and war's undoing of them. A source of war's constitutive presence in society, this dynamic is manifested through a complex of relations between war, knowledge, and power which we term War/Truth and develop in an initial way in the final section of the paper. War/Truth enables the tracing of the intimacy between the battlefield and the wider social, political, and cultural field war helps constitute. It does so in ways that destabilize conventional distinctions that have framed the study of war, such as those between war and peace or combatants and civilians. Taken together, our critique and reconstruction provide a basis for the study of war in a manner adequate to its social powers as a destroyer and maker of truths.

The Absence of War Studies

While not on par with politics or philosophy, the study of war has a rich classical heritage. From Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, through to Caesar,

Josephus, Polybius, Marcellinus and Vegetius, over to Sun Tzu and Ibn Khaldun, up to Machiavelli and Gibbon, and crowned by a philosopher-soldier, Clausewitz, there is a tradition more than sufficient to get a modern intellectual enterprise off the ground. The reason for this heritage is not hard to discern: the ubiquity of war in human histories. It is ''peace''—the idea of a social order from which war is abolished—that is the relatively recent invention (Howard 2000:1, 6). Even so, ''peace'' managed to more or less banish war from social and political thought, a consequence of the pacific and rational presuppositions of the Enlightenment thinking that shaped the universities and disciplines.

As Michael Mann observes, ''From the Enlightenment to Durkheim most major sociologists omitted war from their central problematic'' believing ''future society would be pacific and transnational'' (Mann 1988:147). Proceeding in this manner was possible even as wars raged inside and outside Europe because many Enlightenment thinkers understood civilization as a teleological process through which violence—barbarous, rude, and uncivil—was being removed from society (Keane 1996:14*ff*). Alternatively, as for some eighteenth century theorists, war was a pathology generated by the politics of commercial competition between states, one to be avoided by restructuring commerce (Hont 2005). 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 recapitulated by Jürgen Habermas as the ''forceless force of the better argument'' (Habermas 1984:25). Today, this othering of violence from inquiry is registered institutionally in the lack of university departments and scholarly associations principally devoted to war.[2]

All the same, given the sheer volume of work on war and the military in the social sciences and humanities, it seems absurd to suggest there is no ''war studies.'' Our contention is not that there is not a great deal of writing related to war and military matters. There is, and much of it is of a very high scholarly standard. Aspects of war are studied in disciplinary subfields, most extensively military history and military sociology, and also in archaeology, classics, literature, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry. Scholars of international relations widely study war, and it plays a significant role in the study of culture and memory broadly conceived, as well as in public opinion research. Not least, war has its own policy science, strategic studies, found in military history, political science, and international relations and practiced in war colleges, national security planning staffs, and think tanks. What, then, is missing?

Scholarly disciplines and their institutional apparatuses presuppose some core object of inquiry, such as society or economy. They divide on how to study and teach this object, theories about it, the politics of it, where to devote scholarly resources, and so on. Significantly, if not frequently, scholars dispute just what this object *is*, how best to characterize it, what the most salient elements are. In the absence of a discipline, war itself is not centered as the object of analysis and debate, as itself the focus of a continuing scholarly conversation. At issue are the concerns of *some other* scholarly conversation, such as the relationship between war and state building, the effects of war on public opinion and elections, the war proneness of the international system, the legality or ethics of war, or the consequences of war for society. Whatever insights may be derived about these subject matters, they do not centrally concern war per se. Of course, we learn much of war through studies of these and other kinds. But the dangers are that what war consists of is taken for granted, usually as the clash of arms, and that it is addressed only in and through the terms of a discipline or scholarly project principally devoted to some other subject. In other words, war is reduced to

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[2]Partial exceptions include the Society for Military History and The Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society. However, neither ''military history'' nor ''armed forces and society'' are the same object as ''war.''

another social domain. War appears as a builder of states in historical sociology, a pattern of public opinion in political science, an effect of the international system in international relations scholarship, or a disrupter of personalities in literature and psychology. We are highlighting here in an initial way how it is that war is strangely decentered and fragmented as an object of inquiry, a problem intensified by the institutional diversity of the sites where war is studied.

As H.A. Durfee comments, ''Since Heraclitus proclaimed that 'war is the king of all' the ontological foundations of war and peace have been seriously neglected, even though war and peace as social phenomena have been a daily concern'' (Durfee 1975:549). Broadly speaking, attention has been fixed on particular *wars* rather than *war* as a general force. The literatures concerning various wars are extensive, but there is remarkably little in the way of thought on war as such. John Keane understates: ''political reflection has lagged far behind empirical events'' (Keane 1996:6–7). Set against the staggering totality of armed conflict in modern history, the social and political theory of war is remarkably thin, amounting to a handful of major works and essays.

Underlying the decentering of war and its apprehension through, and reduction to, other social domains is the more fundamental problem of the conceptual black hole surrounding the notion of war itself. What is it? How ought we to think about it, inquire into it, and situate it in relation to other political and social phenomena? Questions of this sort require collective and sustained scholarly endeavor and debate. What is missing, then, is a scholarly project that takes war as its central object of analysis and is adequate to it.

It may be objected that strategic studies is an exception to the argument that inquiry is not centered on war. In fact, strategy is not about war per se, but about how to prevail in it, or more broadly, how to use military and other instrumentalities to attain or secure interests and other valued ends. Clausewitz's ''definition'' of war as the continuation of politics with the addition of other means is in fact a strategic appropriation of war, a plea for the rational direction of war from the standpoint of policy. This is necessary because, on Clausewitz' account, war tends to exceed the purposes for which it is fought, serving its own ends rather than those of policy (Strachan 2007:176*ff*). In contemporary terms, strategic studies is primarily an instrumental science concerned with how to survive and flourish in a world of competing armed powers (Gray 1999). In its narrower, military operational register strategy is about the allocation and deployment of forces and the arrangement of engagements in order to arrive at an advantageous conclusion of hostilities. The domain of inquiry is limited to what is useful and relevant to strategy, with consideration of historical cases usually designed to extract general lessons or principles. This domain may be conceived narrowly or broadly but the overall idea is to conceive war in strategic terms, from the standpoint of rationality and interest. Additionally, because of its purpose, strategic studies is located amid War/Truth, where power and interest haunt inquiry related to war. A host of political investments, commitments, and powers are regularly at stake in knowledges surrounding ''national security'' in a way that is only exceptionally the case in the humanities and social sciences.

But what of more properly scholarly efforts to address war? Below, we look first at the oft-heralded ''interdisciplinarity'' of actually existing war studies before considering the idea of a war-centered war studies. In a paper such as this we cannot consider in any depth the range of literatures related to war. Rather, we discuss some of the disciplinary configurations and limits of academic knowledges related to war. We argue that however rich these disparate literatures may be, they rarely broach the fundamental questions from which a discipline of war studies could begin, despite the efforts of key figures pushing in this direction. War and the power/knowledge relations it entails are in large measure responsible for this disorganization of knowledge.

Interdisciplinarity

As a field of inquiry, strategic studies has an ''axis of cohesion'' in its instrumental standpoint toward war (Abbott 2001:140). Elsewhere, war is studied under the banner of ''interdisciplinarity,'' as in the world's leading department of war studies at King's College London (KCL). There, a diverse and changing array of subjects is taught, from military history and sociology to strategic studies and international relations. The department's core idea of studying war ''in the round,'' through the lenses of different disciplines, was a progressive response to ''drums and trumpets'' military history and to the limits of even the most astute studies produced by military staffs. At its richest, this has included philosophy, ethics, and literature, but no matter how many subjects are brought to bear on war at KCL or similar programs, core questions remain unanswered: how are these subjects justified conceptually and theoretically? What unifies this field of inquiry other than use of the word ''war,'' or a common sense understanding of what this word might refer to? As long as these questions remain unaddressed, the ''interdisciplinarity'' of war studies lacks coherence.

Consequently, the actually existing study of war amounts to a grab bag of disparate topics cobbled together from a variety of disciplines and sources. This is sometimes justified by the notion that war is especially complex or that war is connected to ''everything else,'' such that a theory of war would ''amount to a theory and history of everything'' (Gat 2006:ix). In practice, this move can license an ''anything goes'' approach in which inquiry is shaped by personal, political, or institutional preference.[3] The idea that war is ''too big'' and requires exceptional scholarly procedures implies that ''society,'' ''economy,'' or ''culture,'' for example, are simpler objects of inquiry, less connected to everything else than war. This is not the case; these objects *are* as complex and yet have not eluded sustained disciplinary treatment in their own terms.

The lack of a theoretic core in actually existing war studies becomes evident when compared to that of other interdisciplinary formations. War studies, for example, is not based on a considered critique of the disciplines, as is the case with the array of ''studies'' fields that came of age in the 1970s, such as gender studies, race studies, and cultural studies, each of which evolved their own bodies of theory. With some exception, it does not call for a revision or restructuring of existing disciplines and approaches. In extant war studies departments and programs, ''interdisciplinarity'' means little more than some combination of courses and staff in the disciplines represented in KCL's department.

Historical sociology's ''war party constitutes the major exception to this unexamined interdisciplinarity. Sociologists such as Martin Shaw (1988), Michael Mann (1988), Hans Joas (2003), and Anthony Giddens (1985) argue that armed forces and war have been left out of the major sociological paradigms and that incorporating them disrupts conventional periodizations and conceptions of modern society, while introducing a new set of causal forces. They are able to make these arguments because they offer a theoretic critique of existing approaches, a critique that has led them to an interdisciplinary turn toward military history, military sociology, and strategic studies, one which requires the critique and restructuring of these fields as well. The ''war party'' in sociology demonstrates a paradoxical quality of interdisciplinarity: it presupposes disciplines (Abbott 2001:135). The disciplines generate both the problems to be addressed by interdisciplinarity, and the approaches and methods used to address them. Such scholarship has a strong tendency to focus on the insights and lacunae of the disciplines concerned. The relatively few ''studies'' fields with

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[3]See e.g. Freedman (1994:5, 7) on the use of an ''Anglo-Saxon'' perspective as a selection principle for a scholarly reader.

institutional and intellectual coherence have moved beyond this kind of inter-disciplinarity by developing their own positive research program, as in gender studies.

By producing a body of theory and inquiry, such fields have escaped their dependence on parent disciplines, a dependence all too evident in the case of war studies. For example, the early modern military revolution debate is perhaps the most sophisticated and well developed in military history, turning on the character and timing of the military techniques and technologies that laid the basis for the modern and European territorial state (Rogers 1995). Historians and historical sociologists introduced larger themes concerning the end of the medieval order, the ''rise of the West'' and state–society relations. The sociologists in turn theorized the formation of the state through relations between rulers, merchants, and military organization and technology (Tilly 1992). There is interdisciplinarity going on here but it is *between history and sociology*, with their productive tension between the particular and the general. War studies is at best the site of a debate imported from the disciplines, and to the extent interdisciplinarity is enriching the parent disciplines in this case, it does so in terms of debates about the historical and sociological origins of the modern Western state and its armed forces. There is no ''war studies'' discipline with its *own* core questions for any such conversation to report back to or enrich. This is similarly the case with philosophers writing or teaching the Just War tradition or literature professors working on war literature. There is no professional association or other attributes of a war studies discipline, such as major journals and conferences, to serve as a collection point for insights and debates; such scholars remain more or less isolated in their parent disciplines.

The Idea of War Studies

This discussion has sought to reveal the absence not only of the institutions of war studies but of the *idea* of such a discipline. There has been a failure not only to overcome but even to realize the inadequacies of studying war as a collection of disparate topics from various disciplines and perspectives. Earlier efforts to provide a basis for the study of war, such as those of the historians Hans Delbrück and Michael Howard, have gone astray, crowded out by, among other things, a policy relevant focus on contemporary security concerns. In large measure, the subject of war is dominated by the disciplinary perspectives of political science and international relations. Military history, an essential foundation for any war studies, remains a mostly limited enterprise. Its university presence is restricted, especially as regards major departments and core disciplinary debates, partially a consequence of the fact that military history was not a subject in the professionalization of history as an academic discipline from the mid-nineteenth century. Even in Wilhelmine Germany, Delbrück could only be promoted to full professor at the University of Berlin in world, not military, history (Bucholz 1985:43).

Given the close relationship between legitimacy, authority, and martial tradition in Wilhelmine Germany, the kind of systematic study of war Delbrück represented was especially threatening, as evidenced by the regime's efforts to silence his critiques of German strategy during the Great War. After the war, realizing the significance of the military for German identity and politics, Delbrück and Max Weber planned to establish a tradition of military science in German universities (Bucholz 1985:173–74). For Weber, this was part of an effort to end the ''military epoch of German History'' by re-imagining the officer corps and its professional knowledges along the lines of a democratic militia (quoted in Mommsen 1984:326). This plan was stopped by Weber's death and the Treaty of Versailles, which outlawed not only the Great German General Staff but also

the teaching of military subjects in German universities. The treaty drafters, the Kaiser's officials, and Delbrück and Weber all in their own way grasped the intimacy between knowledge of war and power.

The fate of military history was different in the Anglo-American academy, where anti-militarist reactions to the world wars and the rise of social history largely displaced it. Few leading US history departments have military historians today (Dawson 2008). Although the situation is somewhat different in the United Kingdom, the work of academically respected historians related to war tends to concern political, social, and economic context rather than wartime operations. This is the distinctive stamp of what came to be known as the ''war and society'' tradition from the late 1950s. The *impact* of war and military organization on society, rather than the conduct of war, was the focus (Morillo 2006:40). It was not intended to ''center'' war in this kind of approach to ''war and society,'' a label that in part ''owed its popularity to the implicit suggestion that it was possible to do the history of war while leaving war out of it'' (Dawson 2008:598).

By contrast, Delbrück sought to keep armed forces, politics, and war in the same analytic frame, offering reinterpretations of major historic and social transformations by developing the neglected political-military dimension. While Howard, the founder of the KCL department, never quite approached the grand scale of Delbrück's *The History of Warfare in the Framework of Political History*, he nonetheless sought to build on Delbrück's ideas (Reid 2009).[4] In his autobiography, Howard writes: ''The history of war, I came to realize, was more than the operational history of armed forces. It was the study of entire societies. Only by studying their cultures could one come to understand what it was that they fought about and why they fought in the way they did. Further, the fact that they did so fight had a reciprocal impact on their social structure'' (Howard 2006:145). That Howard's conceptual categories—''cultures,'' ''societies''—are reified can obscure the relational ontology intrinsic to his approach. War and society, for Howard, are entwined in mutually constitutive relations. War is shaped by, and shapes, social context. The implication is that war cannot be studied only as the conduct of military operations, much less as the history of decisive battles. War, as it were, exceeds ''war'' as the clash of arms and is related to a whole range of social phenomena on and off the battlefield. This was a war and society approach that sought to keep war centered while also placing it in broader context.

Perhaps because they were historians, Delbrück and Howard made little effort to critique, revise, and incorporate theoretic traditions from the social sciences. No intellectual basis was laid for a discipline, no core object of analysis and set of approaches sketched out or debated. A key insight into Howard's work was left to lie fallow. If war's excess is taken seriously, that is, the idea that war shapes the social relations in which it is embedded, then war is present beyond the war front and beyond wartime, in and among apparently pacific social, cultural, and economic relations. Any conception of war limited to the clash of arms, such as measures of battle deaths extensively used to identify incidences of war in quantitative analyses, necessarily misses this crucial and intrinsic dimension of war. ''[W]ar must be seen as a social activity related to the whole complex of social life and organization'' (Shaw 1988:11). Analysis faces the apparently contradictory demands of centering war, while simultaneously seeing it as ''shot through'' the surrounding social context. Below, we will argue that Clausewitz's understanding of *fighting* provides resources to meet these demands.

Even had Howard and others developed their insights theoretically, war studies' fragile beginnings still would have run into the ''virtually unbreakable'' structure of the established disciplines (Abbott 2001:149). Andrew Abbott's

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[4]Delbrück's major work was published in English in four volumes as the *History of the Art of War* (Delbrück 1990).

influential study of the social science disciplines emphasizes their institutional entrenchment, based upon university departments and national professional associations. At moments, however, Abbott goes beyond the sociological register of his argument, claiming that any ''major intellectual position'' can be expressed within the existing array of disciplines. Not only are the disciplines entrenched institutionally but they also adequately express the possible array of standpoints that can be taken in social science. ''To create a fundamental change in the arrangement of disciplines, it would in my view be necessary for someone or some group to destroy some of the foundational ideas of late nine-teenth-century social thought'' (*ibid.*:152).

Those ideas were the heirs of Enlightenment thinkers who had conceived modernity in opposition to violence, and did so with hubris toward the Ancients, for whom war was the great subject of history. There is high tension between the experience of war in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the scholarly devaluation of war in the traditions of social and political inquiry inspired by the European Enlightenments. ''Whoever takes seriously the history of violence in the twentieth century will find it hard to believe in myths of progress'' (Joas 2003:1). It almost goes without saying that ''war'' is not a category in Abbott's text, in which the disciplines are discussed in their pacific instantiation. To be sure, there are many vibrant subfields and more or less splendid if isolated litera-tures that speak to war than we have considered here. But approaches based on the putatively peaceful outcomes of free trade, liberal democracy, and develop-ment remain not only influential but foundational in social and political inquiry. Modernization and the human flourishing it promises are ultimately conceived as peaceful in character. Even modernity's dark side is limited to ''domination'' and ''structural violence'' in most of the work of scholars inspired by Marx, Foucault, and other critics.

Abbott, however, does have occasional reference to particular wars, noting for example that the Great War marked the end of that ''extraordinary era'' during which the foundations of the ''social scientific imagination'' were laid (Abbott 2001:152). War works here, as so often, as an unexamined periodizer. Why and how did the Great War put an end to this era? What role does war play in trans-forming intellectual life?[5] Questions such as these are all the more pressing given that the pacific visions of liberal and Enlightenment thinkers were not real-ized. War has exercised and continues to exercise causal powers on politics and society not prefigured in the major traditions that came out of Abbott's ''extraor-dinary era.'' As Giddens underscores: ''My main point is to emphasize that the impact of war in the twentieth century upon generalized patterns of change has been so profound that it is little short of absurd to seek to interpret such pat-terns without systematic reference to it'' (Giddens 1985:244). War, we argue, is the hammer that Abbott cannot imagine, one which could recast social and political thought (Abbott 2001:149-150). Some of the reasons why it has not have to do with the ways in which power seeks to ''monopolize'' knowledge of war and armed force. But others, we suggest, arise from the nature of war itself, from its character as an unmaker of truths, an argument to which we now turn.

The Ontology of War

Suggesting the absence of war studies is, in part, a consequence of war's recalci-trance as an object of knowledge requires us to say something of its fundamental

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[5]Paul Fussell explores this question with respect to literature, arguing that ''the dynamics and iconography of the Great War have proved crucial political, rhetorical, and artistic determinants on subsequent life.'' Fussell roots his analysis in the generative character of war: ''At the same time the war was relying on inherited myth, it was gen-erating new myth, and that myth is part of the fibre of our lives'' (Fussell 1975:ix).

character, those basic properties encountered in the thematic or historically specific study of war. We do this through some observations about ontology in social science and in war.

Ontology in social science, through the effort to identify, categorize, and describe the fundamental structure of what exists, provides foundational assumptions from which inquiry can proceed, if only by serving as an ''under-laborer'' clearing the ground for other work (Cruickshank 2003:36 and *passim*). Because social sciences are defined by inquiry and the accumulation of knowledge, these foundational ''truth claims'' are not left untouched. Rather, they are revisited and contested in ways which have bearing on how inquiry subsequently is carried out. This is because social scientific analyses always proceed with ontological assumptions which are liable to problematization and debate. Although not always recognized as such, these shared ontological problematics are a defining feature of academic disciplinarity. Disciplines can be thought of as centering on core ontological problematics—areas of contestation over the nature of their subject—which then serve as enabling conditions for various traditions of inquiry within those disciplines.

War studies has no such enabling coherence. It lacks both the ontological problematization of its subject and the multiple exchanges between foundation and inquiry that might sustain it. War studies exists in the fragmented form we have identified because *war* goes largely under-theorized at the most basic level: ontology. Accordingly, our focus for this section is the ontology of war and its relationship to knowledge about war. Our comments on the ontology of war center upon those elements of war that shape it as a knowledge problem, which are determinate for the epistemology of war. These elements are not reducible to epistemology nor are they thinkable without it. We are seeking to say something fundamental about what war *is,* and about the challenges of knowing about it, and how the two are importantly linked. Additionally, we approach war as a question for ontology because we take it to be an event of ontological significance for politics and society as such.

Fighting and the Historicity of War

So, what can be said of the ontology of war, that fundamental character which manifests itself in each instance of war and is true of war in general? As a phenomenon, war presents itself in historically specific ways and most writing about it reflects this. Military historians begin with the archive and the particularity of testimony. Strategic analysts attend to specific alignments of forces and the effect of engagements on the course of a war. Those who experience a war encounter its particular violences and their cumulative impact. Despite this, the question of the fundamental character of war beyond its finite, historical manifestation recurs: just as war poets frequently intimate transcendent human truth, strategists and policy makers seek to recover eternal verities from narratives of past battles and campaigns.

A proper approach to the ontology of war does not seek to resolve this discomforting tension, as though some decision were possible between ''war'' and ''wars'' as the correct object of inquiry. Rather, we propose to take it as a basic framework from which to proceed. We are not the first to do so. Clausewitz, tellingly described as both historically specific to the point of irrelevance (van Creveld 1991:ix; Kaldor 1999:13-30) and a source of timeless insight (Gray 1999:75-112), also grapples with the universal and the historically contingent character of war, what we call its *historicity*. We consider his efforts below and mark the recurrence of this conceptual tension in Etienne Balibar's recent work (Balibar 2008). He discusses the continually transformative effect of ''this war''—the war we are in or may be subject to—upon efforts to think about

''war'' as such. The historicity of war, in the first instance, consists of the urgent grasp of ''this war'' on politics and society, of its ordering effects on thought and knowledge about war.

What is it about ''this war,'' most fundamentally, that demands attention to the exclusion of other perspectives? Note a difference between accounts produced by strategists, commanders, staff officers, soldier poets, and memorialists, on the one hand, and much of the academic literature mentioned earlier. Participant perspectives, with varying degrees of directness, center on *fighting*, past, current, or potential. Fighting is that which thematically unifies war in general and in particular—''war'' with ''wars''—and no ontology of war can exclude it. Attention to fighting is that which marks out war-centered analysis from that reducing war to a secondary effect. Fighting and the violence of war exercise a profound grasp on the imagination, constituting the practical test to which strategic thought is oriented and the conventional mode for the achievement of victory. Fighting is dwelt upon in representations of war in popular literature and cinema. Even Sun Tsu's aphorism that true strategic excellence consists in ''[subduing] the enemy without fighting'' (Sun 1971:77) derives its power from a paradoxical relation to this basic truth, perhaps best articulated in Clausewitz's much quoted observation that fighting is as definitive for war as cash exchange for economy (Clausewitz 1976:97).

However, what fighting *is*, how it might be understood and positioned within a fundamental theory of war, cannot be taken for granted. Clearing the ground for a new ontology of war requires recognition that fighting understood instrumentally, as the Clausewitzian duel, the test of arms, as ''kinetic exchange,'' misses its wider implication and importance. But as we saw above, fighting, or more broadly military operations, is the site of a decisive divide in inquiry that can be characterized as ''war *or* society,'' between a focus on war as fighting and on its impact on society. The former's limitation of focus, we suggest, is not an intellectual failure but, rather, an outcome of the historicity of war. For those who focus on war as fighting, its reality as an actual and potential presence compels an instrumental relation to it, such that knowledge about war is never fully exterior to *an order war itself creates*. Fighting always entails the problem of how to survive and prevail, and the question of the appropriate instruments and means by which to do so occupies the minds of soldiers, strategists, and political leaders who embark on war. The question is what is occluded by such instrumentalization—by the order of knowing and being war creates—and what might be said of the wider ontological significance of fighting? Economics as a discipline after all has not been limited to or necessarily centered upon the study of cash exchange. War studies as the study of warfighting surely apprehends that most definitive of war, but rarely escapes from the limits of historic particularity and thereby constrains its own potential utility for a wider analysis of war.

Fully developing our point about the instrumentalization that fighting demands would require attention to the broad and disparate literatures concerning the experience of war and its effects, something we do only in a limited fashion here. But it enables a preliminary observation on the ontology of war: war is defined by fighting or its immanent possibility and—as an historical, existential, issue in the lives of those who seek to understand it—this definitive element resists disinterested analysis, while tending to instrumentalize knowledge about war.

"Beings Cast in Motion": Fighting, Polity, and Society

One work that describes the powerful grasp of war on thought is Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. An extended essay on the relationship between ontology and ethics, 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?'' (Levinas 1969:21) His point is the pervasive, but not always recognized or acknowledged, influence of war on knowledge, the ''truth'' of which functions within public rationality and institutions as a basis for the flourishing and survival of the polity. War for such rationality and institutions serves as a reality against which their truths are tested. Despite dissimulations by political figures and official organs, ''the trial by force is the test of the real'': a point of vindication or failure for those who might speak truth about the realities of war (*ibid.*).

So far, Levinas appears to offer an imperative for instrumentalized strategic thought, for getting it right or facing ruin on the battlefield. But he quickly goes further to suggest there can be no rational comprehension of politics, no political calculation at all without understanding how ''in advance [war's] shadow falls over the actions of men.'' Vitally, this imbrication of war and truth goes beyond the narrow framework of strategic thought and public rationality. That it does so is revealed in the reality of war itself, the violence of which ''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.'' While fighting remains a kinetic exchange, the Clausewitzian *Schlacht,* and the most fundamental element of war, it is also an event and 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. It is a ''casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity… by an objective order from which there is no escape…'' (*ibid.*). War might, as Heraclitus tells us, make kings, gods, and slaves, but it also retains the power to unmake them, sometimes irrespective of their own actions.

This transformative effect, the capacity to rework the reality of social and political existence, is, of course, the objective of waging war. War forces change, strategy being both the science of its management and the means to a putatively superior peace. But Levinas' 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 are not only, or even primarily, brute facts, strategic datum. Rather, they are, among other things, bearers of meaning and manifestations of contemporary truths. They are the authors and outcomes of social, political, and economic processes. Reinvested with full meaning, fighting marks the disruption of this wider order and the people and other entities which populate it, the unmaking and remaking of certainties, of meaning, of—potentially—the very coordinates of social and political life. ''Since [Napoleon], all campaigns have produced such comet like vibrations that they can scarcely be thought of as only military because they involve the whole of society'' (Clausewitz quoted in Bucholz 1985:25).

As the basic element of the ontology of war then, fighting presents itself as a duality. First, it drives the intellectual instrumentality of truth about—and in—war, through its historicity and immediacy. But second, it also exceeds the terms of that immediacy. This ''excess'' is the capacity of organized violence to be more than kinetic exchange, to be constitutive and generative, to ''cast into motion'' subjects who are then alienated from themselves and come to know themselves and the world in new ways. For us, this ''excess,'' lying beyond the compelling, immanent socio-political logics of combatants, is at the core of the ontology of war. It is both that which gives war its status as an ontological event for politics and society and a problematizing framework from which a critical approach to war studies might begin. It is an ontology that retains the power of war-centered analysis without limiting inquiry to a focus on warfighting. We hold on to the ontological primacy of fighting, but wrest it from the instrumentality its historicity demands.

In doing so, we note the material and intellectual importance of this historicity. War, like a societal centrifuge, has the power to draw in resources—intellectual, scientific, social, economic, cultural, and political—and unmake and re-work them in ways that cannot be foreseen. This disordering and reordering in part determines the dynamics of strategic thought, the rise and fall of various theories and paradigms of warfighting, as well as the more general subjective violence, the violence to meaning, to which Levinas testifies. We note also that this violence undoes many traditional enframements of war: in its contingency and destruction, it exceeds the strategic calculi of war as an instrument of policy; in its generative power of re-making, it exceeds reduction to its destructive consequences alone. Having offered these observations on the ontology of war, we now illustrate and expand upon them with particular reference to the problem of knowledge in and about war.

"More than a True Chameleon": Clausewitz's "Special Problem"

Clausewitz's effort to describe and theorize on the basis of the historicity of war, to analyze war as something subject to historical contingency, rests on a set of elegant contradictions. Initially, he limits the consequences of war's historicity by presenting it as an instrument of policy rather than a thing in itself, effectively relegating the historical adaptation of war to an effect of changing policy imperatives. Doing so, he suggests, allows an understanding of the historical–contextual variations between wars. He then expresses the tension between war in the universal and particular through the metaphor of the "true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to a given case," while going on to argue that as a "total phenomenon" war is *more* than this true chameleon (Clausewitz 1976:89). This "more than" we take to be fundamental.

As a true chameleon war is something clearly identical over time, reappearing at different junctures with a patina of historic variation. *More than* a true chameleon, war's adaptation across time is not so superficial, but more radical altogether. So much so that Clausewitz suggests it can be fully captured only within the encompassing socio-political ontology of the "trinity": the historically contingent and constantly transforming structure of people, government and military with their adherent characteristics of passion, reason and technique. Relations between each of these elements, "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" (*ibid.*). As a comment on the ontology of war, this statement of indeterminacy might superficially be taken as secondary to the neater, more famous dicta that precede it: war as "the continuation of policy by other means," as "duel," or a "wrestling match" (*ibid.*:75, 87). 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 ceases with the "decline" of ideology, the state, the advent of "new wars," etc. From the perspective of ontology, however, are not his remarks on the historic contingency of war and on uncertainty in warfare equally the points at which Clausewitz tells us what war "is"?

Answering this question properly requires us to return to the duality of fighting identified above and recognize that On War proceeds along two separate but intimately linked analytical axes. Clausewitz sought to write both as a staff officer offering guidance on strategy to his colleagues and policy makers, and as philosopher of war whose primary concern was less instruction than interpretative, descriptive analysis (Strachan 2007:38). *On War*, then, manifests the duality of fighting, resting on a tension between the need to write of war both strategically and to account for it as a phenomenon. On the one hand, it is written to produce certainties through identifying and methodically limiting uncertainties.

Thus uncertainty is viewed above all instrumentally, as a problem for the conduct of operations and (to use a more contemporary formulation) a potential ''effect'' to be inflicted on the enemy. On the other hand, it is a text that recognizes uncertainty *itself* as that which is most enduring, most *certain* in war (Herbig 1989). As Clausewitz reminds both soldiers and theorists ''who aim at fixed values,'' in war ''everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities'' (1976:136). From the strategic perspective, war cannot stand alone, un-instrumentalized; policy objectives always frame inquiry. From the philosophical perspective, war emerges differently, for us, significantly so. The encounter with uncertainty both analytically and in the conduct of war illuminates the relationship between war's interior, political-strategic logics and its wider excess, the ''casting into motion'' of social and political orders.

Again, we would suggest that a decision between these two analytical registers is not necessary or desirable for an ontology of war. Both must be grasped and their relationship accounted for. For now, though, we suggest that uncertainty in war needs to be analyzed not in the first instance as a practical problem but as defining characteristic, as part of that which provides the unity of war in general and in particular, and as that which is inescapably and centrally part of the ontology of war.

So how might ''uncertainty''—a nebulous and unhelpful concept to be sure—provide a foundational element for the study of war? Clausewitz consistently accompanies his positive dicta about war with qualifying comments about the role and centrality of uncertainty, the absence of knowledge and, correspondingly, the importance of chance and luck. This extends from the conceptual 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. Indeed, uncertainty on the battlefield is one of the main barriers to offering a positive theory of the conduct of war. This is the context in which Clausewitz's account of ''friction'' and danger in battle are to be understood since here, in fighting and the potential for fighting, the essential activity of war, we find the point at which uncertainty is generated. This is the point also at which the presence of uncertainty is generalized as a knowledge problem, wherein ''*the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation*'' (Clausewitz 1976:113, emphasis added). In battle and on campaign, the only certainty is uncertainty and ''the general unreliability of all information'' must be taken for granted (*ibid.*:140). A recurrent theme in his efforts to describe war's basic nature—perhaps as definitive as *die Schlact*—is its resistance to and potential to disrupt certainties. This presents ''a special problem in war'' in that ''for lack of objective knowledge one has to trust to talent or to luck'' (*ibid.*).

We mark in particular Clausewitz's use of the term ''special'' to describe the problem of knowledge both in and about war. It is special because it is unique: it pertains to war like no other phenomenon, although its significance goes well beyond war alone. It is special also because it is recurrent and unavoidable. Uncertainty is that of war that all who experience it can be most sure of encountering. Uncertainty, the ''special problem'' of knowledge, is common to war as a protean phenomenon across ages immemorial; ''more than a true chameleon,'' it is that which always in part occludes war from those who would seek to know it. Even ''the face of battle,'' seemingly the most direct source of knowledge of fighting, is, as John Keegan reminds us, only ever partially glimpsed by those who participate and perhaps the hardest of analytical objects for those who would study it (Keegan 1978:chap.1).

Fighting presents itself as the duration of the clash of arms but is an always contingent yet potentially decisive switchpoint or emergent moment in which both strategic instrumentality and the order of public reason that permits and

contextualizes it are stretched, distorted, and potentially unmade. In fighting, reason and knowing are, to use Clausewitz's term, ''refracted,'' like light projected through an irredeemably distorted optic beyond which no one can expect to see with clarity (although some might compensate more skillfully for its effects). In this way, an initial sense of war's importance as an ontological event becomes apparent. The enframing certainties of pacific order, identity, continuity, and certainty always exist subject to its undoing. It manifests an unavoidable threat that the composition of our objective order of social and political truth might be unmade in ways that cannot be fully seen in advance or necessarily understood afterward. A fundamental, essential, property of war is thus the actual and potential undoing of all that stands as essential in human orders. The ontological structure and the ontological status of war as an event centre on the undoing of certitudes and (in ways we elaborate below) in the generation of new ones. War consumes, reworks, and produces truths. Defined in the last instance by pure contingency, fighting exceeds kinetic exchange, marking a point of genesis and a vanishing point for social and political orders and the ontologies on which they rest.

Always in excess of the strategic or juridical duration of fighting, war stands beyond the discrete ontology that fighting evidences to take on an elemental function within ''peace.'' Orders of peace thus consist in significant measure of veiled traces and effects of fighting—an order of battle traduced through civic transformation, but an order of battle nonetheless (cf. Foucault 2003:14–17, 50–52). Beginning from such an ontology, we are able to move from ''war *and* society'' to ''war *in* society'': to now focus anew on the multiple traces of war's generative powers and their function in the production of social and political orders.

War/Truth

Fighting, on the view sketched above, introduces disruption that has the potential to go well beyond the strategic calculus that enables it to transform the order of political and social reason from which such calculation begins. Here, we offer a critical departure from the Clausewitzian separation of war from policy, in which war is the instrument of policy. Once war's wider order of destruction and constitution is recognized, such a separation cannot stand and the tension between the most famous of Clausewitz's dicta, his trinitarian contextualization of warfare and the ''comet's tail'' generated in society by fighting becomes pronounced. Nonetheless, the relevance of his effort to separate instrumentally war from politics is profound, as attention to the historical situation in which he wrote reveals.

Without question, Clausewitz's emphasis on uncertainty in war and correspondingly the importance of judgment and ''genius'' in military command were of a piece with the post-Kantian idealism of his day; a conceptual framework he mobilized to good effect against writers such as Jomini and other rationalists whose excessive Cartesianism he considered dangerous (Gat 2001:170-191). But there is a far more important dimension to the relation between Clausewitz's circumstance and his position in *On War*. His emphasis on the chaotic and unpredictable unmaking of certainties was both a reflection on his own experience as a soldier and an outcome of a moment of violent transformation to which he was witness, the impact of the Napoleonic way of war on a profoundly conservative Prussian military and society still enthralled by the campaigns of Frederick the Great (Strachan 2007:chap.1).

Clausewitz was a member of a small group of military intellectuals who struggled to reform the Prussian service against a nobility that resisted change and proclaimed its mastery of war with reference to an authoritative Frederician

legacy. This past record of military supremacy not only determined the training of troops and the conduct of war on the battlefield but also legitimated the social order around which the Prussian army was formed and in which it found expression. Clausewitz spent his later career seeking change in a deeply conjoined social, political, and military regime that brooked no revision until its humiliation by Napoleon at Jena and Auerstadt. After Napoleon's final defeat, it set about undoing the work of the reform movement (Shanahan 1945).

The ontology of war, then, was not simply a conceptual problem for Clausewitz, it was political. Mastery of the means of war, of who spoke authoritative truth about war, was inseparable from the regime of truth and power to which he was subject. In prizing hereditary social status above dangerously French notions such as meritocracy, this regime determined his own chances of advancement and command just as it limited his soldiers' capacity to maneuver effectively against their enemy. In Clausewitz's thought and writings, the separation of war from policy, of the executive from the military and the populous in the trinity, were calculated interventions that would bolster the primacy of the nascent Prussian general staff in military matters and limit the power of what Clausewitz and his fellow reformers saw as an ineffectual, strategically inept hereditary monarchy. The Clausewitzian dictum is a demand for a separation of powers in military matters in a society for which the unity of social status and military command were fundamental.

This dimension of Clausewitz's work, which situates him historically and his writing politically, we take to be particularly significant. The power to speak truth about war, to embody the Prussian tradition, was central to the social order in which he lived and the legitimation of political authority within it. This linkage between authoritative knowledge about war and the legitimation of power, the need to exercise power within and through a collective narrative in which war is a fundamental referent is, we suggest, a recurrent element of politics as such. Clausewitz's situation was thus exemplary but not unique: it is to greater or lesser degree that of all who seek to produce knowledge about war in the context of an order of public reason. This intimate relation between authoritative knowledge about war, symbolic proximity to martial tradition, and the legitimation of power we bring together under the term War/Truth. It refers to the dependence of political orders on authoritative knowledges and narratives concerning armed force and war. While existential investments are made in these truths, they remain vulnerable to the contingencies of war. For the defeated as for the victors, in small wars or large ones, war can disrupt, undermine, and transform orders of public reason and the political identities they define.

War/Truth's operation is clearly apparent in the politics of the Prussian military reformers. It is also evident in the strenuous efforts of war leaders to shape public discourse and perception, efforts which often run aground amidst the complexities and uncertainties of wartime events. But war's constitutive field extends well beyond the reputation of leaders to entire social and political orders. It disseminates and disperses knowledges and effects into divergent fields and sites, often apparently unrelated to the conduct of war and state power. This becomes clearer when we recognize that the nature of War/Truth is creative, less a product of the generative powers of war, it is a primary site for their realization. To function, War/Truth requires the production and imposition of retrospective certitudes on the contingencies of war. Ultimately, the recurrent uncertainties of fighting must be recast as the normative certainties that make polities possible, as for example in the role of narratives of the Second World War in underpinning national and international orders in the post-1945 world. In this sense, the final element of war's ontology is its power to remake what is unmade. War drives the remaking of certainty, foremost being authoritative

certainties about war itself and the constitution of peace (cf. Scarry 1985 on creating an ''incontestable reality'':27, chap.2).

A small but revealing example is the recent erection at Hyde Park Corner in London of the Memorial Gates, recognizing the contribution of British imperial troops in both world wars. In sight of Nelson's column, it stands about 100 yards from Wellington's Arch, commemorating the Peninsular Campaign and Waterloo, and the monument to the Royal Artillery's dead in the First and Second World Wars, among others. These other memorials were erected within a decade or two, sometimes much less, of the wars they commemorate. By contrast, the Memorial Gates were erected in November 2002, nearly sixty years after the end of the Second World War. This was in the wake of serious racial conflict in Britain's northern cities and the Cantell Report on the Bradford riots which spoke of a crisis of inclusion in British society and a terminal decline of the ideal of multiculturalism. The War on Terror had further transformed the problem of managing communal difference into one of security and fear (Brighton 2007). In this context, the agitation for a memorial on the part of South Asian, African and Afro-Caribbean ex-servicemen, and the decision of the authorities to proceed with the memorial, reflected the need for resources for reiterating a national narrative that could include migrant communities and their descendents. That is, the memorial was conceived, built, and received as a moment in a new project of civic integration, celebrating the ''rich diversity of British society'' (Memorial Gates Trust n.d.).

To call the Memorial Gates, a ''war memorial,'' like the others around it, is to bracket war off from this contemporary political context, and to imagine that the memorial is only about recognizing the service of some nearly forgotten soldiers, that it has little directly to do with the present. To name it a project of social inclusion is to imagine the memorial has little to do with war and to miss the potency of wartime service and sacrifice as a basis for citizenship. The Memorial Gates attempt the validation of a social order and a national identity through reference to an order of battle. That is, this project of British identity is a War/ Truth. In this, it is little different from the other ''war'' memorials around it, which also introduced into civic space totems of a martial order that participated in shaping the ''civic'' order in various ways. More generally, military service— ''fighting''—historically has been not only an important but a primary foundation for demands for social inclusion and rights (Janowitz 1976). Equally, in diverse manner, national identities are almost always fighting identities. The truth of who ''we'' are is almost always a War/Truth. As such, these truths are always subject to undoing by war.

Conclusion: War in Society

We are not the first to note the strangely pacific terms of social and political thought or to juxtapose them with the violent histories that continue. Broadly speaking, liberal modernity constructs and brackets war through periodization and separation, and by conceiving it as an ethical and legal challenge (Howard 1978). When war does occur, it is conceived primarily in a normative register, as a source of human suffering. Its conduct was left to coercive institutions of state and their mostly military staffs until the ''civilianization'' of strategic thought and practice after 1945 in the United States. War, on these renderings, is antithetical to liberal order.

By contrast, on our view, when the scope and operation of War/Truth is traced, little in the social world goes untouched by the orders war creates. War shapes so much of the architecture of our reality—not just that which refers to and memorializes it—that a meaningful, sustained analytic focus becomes challenging. War/Truth makes other power/knowledge systems possible by providing

a securing framework. Working out the contours and recesses of War/Truth in various social and historical contexts is beyond us here, but we hope to have provided a basis upon which such studies might begin and within which the existing relevant but scattered literatures can be positioned. As long as scholars in the social sciences and humanities operate in a mostly pacific universe, they will continue to misname and misconceive that around us which belongs to an order of war as belonging to that of peace.

At the same time, the relations between political power and knowledge about war mean that the academic study of war finds itself uniquely constrained and in continual competition with state institutions and their civilian advocates in ways that are unique. Social and political orders have enormous and varied investments in War/Truth. Its function in the determination of order sets war apart within the sociology of knowledge. Not only are effective militaries, and the knowledges required to constitute, govern, and use them, necessary for the survival and flourishing of polities, but political orders entail narratives regarding the authoritative and legitimate command of armed force. War, truth, and power form an intimate complex of relations. In this context, inquiry based on the uncertainty of war challenges the vital foundations of political authority itself, since such authority rests in part on its own claim to knowledge in a manner that stresses the conjoined certitudes of its own political-military tradition and powers of command. To analyze the nature of war and trace its effects in reference to an unknowable, never quite controllable field of contingency is to question the basic presumptions of competence on which political authority rests.

The absence of a discipline of war studies, then, stands as a direct expression of the relations between war and knowledge about war. The historicity of war shapes the institutionalization of its study, dissipating it across disciplines while rendering it effectively beyond disciplinization. The institutional manifestation of actually existing war studies thus remains disjointed, itself a contingent combination of forces in which the instrumental logics of strategic studies inevitably pass for a central axis of cohesion. Our intent here is not to suggest that, somehow, our argument takes us beyond War/Truth and the historicity of war, as though some position outside history were possible. Nor by extension do we place our own scholarship beyond the ontology of war. There is little exterior to the orders war creates. But in writing war back into the polity—in engaging war *in* society—we make a potentially democratizing move, wresting knowledge of war from the sphere of political authority and the knowledge complex around it. We have written war out of the architecture of our reality; what will it mean to write it back in?

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