War As Double: Modern and Postmodern Thinkers Re-Define War

Nick Mansfield

Abstract
The canonical theories of war see war as either the opposite to, or a continuation of, civil society. From Freud on, however, war has been seen as a site of ambivalence or doubleness. By deconstructing the oppositions on which any definition of war would seem to depend—between war and peace, and friend and enemy—Jacques Derrida shows how war and its putative opposites (democracy and human rights, for example) both incite and anathematise one another simultaneously. This paper argues that it is by way of this kind of deconstructive logic that we can best understand our present global situation, in which wars are fought on behalf of democracy and human rights, while they threaten democracy and human rights, and are resisted in the name of democracy and human rights.

Key Words: War, Derrida, deconstruction, Levinas, Carl Schmitt.

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The long modern era—do we still belong to it?—is an era of the new, of invention, of revolution and democracy, of liberalism, neo-liberalism, anti-liberalism and post-liberalism, of colonialism, its demise and disavowed renewals, of love and death, the death of humanism, death of values, death of empires, of nations and peoples, cultures and languages, traditions and forms. As much as any of these things, it is also an era of war. Induced by the revolutionary wars of the late eighteenth century, expanded by the national and colonial wars of the nineteenth, the modern era finds in the grand European civil wars of the twentieth century its most revealing catastrophe, expression as they are of its most unresolved tensions and telling longings. So, given the impact war has had on us, given that, as Alain Badiou has pointed out, war so defined the twentieth century that it marked itself out in pre-war and post-war phases, given all this, you would think we would know what war actually was, and how it emerged in relation to the political and the social, our cultures, and psychologies. And indeed there are a thousand accounts of war’s relation to other things, to peace and power, art and subjectivity. Yet the consensus about these things is vague, largely rhetorical and too quickly moralistic.

The classical accounts of war divide into two streams. On the one hand, there is the position taken by Hobbes and Kant that, in different ways,
sees war as the degrading natural state of humanity from which we are trying to escape when we institute organised society and sovereign authority. On the other hand, there is the West’s most influential and cited understanding of war in Clausewitz, that war is the continuation of politics by other means. These accounts survive today, of course. Behind the intensifying conservative social policies dominant in western countries since the 1980s, we detect the Hobbesian idea that the social is perched precariously on top of a chaos that threatens constantly to suck it down into interminable and irredeemable social violence. Here, war is the frontier between the social and pre- or anti-social. It is the line at which the forces of law and order struggle to keep out violent disorganisation. The re-casting of social disputes as wars is not a mere rhetorical gesture. Rather, it partakes of a fully developed if only partly revealed social theory wherein war defines the limit of the social. The Clausewitzian position is, incredibly enough, now ascendant on the other ‘critical’ side of the political divide. The idea that war and policy are now seamlessly co-ordinated is seen by a host of radical critics from Foucault to Badiou and Antonio Negri as a way of revealing the violence of the liberal global agenda.

The classical accounts endure then as the defining ways in which the relationship between war and civil society is conceived. Yet there is a third way, and this too, in at least one of its versions, has been highly influential. In this view, war and peace are neither separate from, nor continuous with one another, but in a relationship of ambivalence, unresolved contradiction or doubleness. Freud argued that war involves the re-emergence of primitive violent impulses we thought had been superseded by civilisation, but that in fact had simply been repressed. Indeed, according to this account, the processes of repression on which sober civil relations depend do not reduce our violent impulses, as much as intensify them by way of an ever tightening constriction of them that must find expression somewhere. In other words, the attempt to control unconscious violence compounds and strengthens it. The control of and incitement to violence then becomes part of a single process. The more civilised we are, the more intense our inner violence will be. It should have been no surprise then, when the cosmopolitan civilisations Freud thought of as the highest achievement of humanity, exploded in the most atavistic nationalist violence in 1914. Theorising this event, which brought on a moral crisis for the young science of psychoanalysis, Freud was able to argue that what war showed was the ambivalence at the heart of all human relationships: civilisation collapsing into violence, love into murderous resentment, and identification into loathing. This idea of war as the sublimation of violence entered modern consciousness, and has become part of our psychological common sense, like so much of the Freudian legacy. We can see it in the a-historical way in which the peace movement, for example, sees war not as a phase in the unfolding of specific political
events, but as the expression of elementary forms of social, cultural or gender-based violence.

In the Hobbesian account, war was the opposite of civil society; in Clausewitz’s, the continuation of it. In Freud’s account, the relationship is far more complicated. The social incites war while repudiating, even anathematising, it. The relationship is contradictory, ambivalent and irreducibly problematic. War emerges by way of the very social relations that would seem opposite to it, and that we like to think we are determined to protect from war. The relationship between war and civil society is not one of opposition or identity, but of dangerous doubleness and obscure entanglement.

This way of thinking about war has been picked up by a variety of modern and postmodern thinkers, from Bataille to Deleuze and Guattari. It is in Jacques Derrida’s discussion of war that this thinking of war and the social in terms of doubleness reaches its most mature expression, however, and for this reason, I want to dwell on it a little more fully. Derrida’s account of war proceeds by way of the deconstruction of the two key binary oppositions on which a clear definition of war would seem to depend: on the one hand, the distinction between war and peace; on the other, between friend and enemy. The first deconstruction emerges through a reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s discussion of war in Totality and Infinity, and the second through Carl Schmitt’s The Concept of the Political.

Derrida’s discussion of Levinas is a commentary on the latter is tracing of both war and peace back to their common source in the relationship to otherness anterior to all things. Levinas does not see war and peace as opposites to one another. Both war and peace arise as possibilities of human intersubjectivity on the same terms, and in the same direction. ‘Only beings capable of war can rise to peace,’ Levinas writes. This is because, to Levinas, human being and everything it encompasses—subjectivity, agency, historicity—all emerge only after a prior opening towards the otherness that calls us into being, the fact that we always arrive later than something other that must always precede us. We emerge only in relation to a previously existing otherness to which we are responding, before we have any choice in the matter. Our open-ness to this otherness is summarised as our relationship to what Levinas calls ‘the face,’ the absolute and ineluctable degree zero of our relationship to the difference of otherness, which exists prior to that relationship having any content. Before I know who or even what you are, your face opens to me in the simple incipient possibility of relationship. In this opening arises both the possibility of war and of peace. Levinas writes: ‘War . . . presupposes[s] the face and the transcendence of the being appearing in the face.’

To Derrida, Levinas’s argument is the inverse of the one we have seen in thinkers like Hobbes. Where Hobbes would see war as pre-existing
peace, and peace as always threatened by the re-emergence of war, Levinas argues that openness to the other, the very logic of peace, pre-exists war. This would seem to say that peace is larger than, and encloses war, and thus always implicitly triumphs over it; but to Derrida, there is a certain horror to this logic. Levinas may have effectively deconstructed the opposition between war and peace, but Derrida wants to insist on the dangerous, unstable and infinitely problematic situation this produces. If Levinas were right, war would always be notionally or residually peaceful. It would not, therefore, be something to abominate and refuse, but something to which we could be resigned as simply another denomination of human relationship. Thus, to Derrida, it is not possible to simply exclude war from the social by definition, nor is it possible to accept it as an inevitable part of our relationships. It both arises from within our sociality and is the scourge of it. It opens as part of the opening of all that is good about us, yet threatens to ruin it and we do not accept it. Sociality is thus irreducibly double and problematic. We can neither simply exclude war nor resign ourselves to it.

Derrida also deconstructs the other binary opposition on which the identity and meaning of war would seem to depend: the opposition between friend and enemy. Carl Schmitt had argued influentially that the definition of a political group depended on the identification of a shared enemy, and the real possibility of war with them. To Schmitt, this enmity was not the result of any aspect of the enemy, their ethnicity, for example. It was not personal but structural, not a response to the other’s foreign nature, but the construction of a role for them in the self-identification of the group. The relationship with the enemy-other, therefore, is not a result of personal antagonism. Indeed, such public enmity could co-exist with private friendship. The problem with this contradiction, as Derrida points out, is that the co-existence of your private friendship with public enmity is only possible in a world where the distinction between public and private exists, but this is the very distinction that the identification of the enemy brings into existence for the first time. In other words, the identification of the enemy refers to a pre-existing distinction between public and private that only it can bring into existence. In short, Schmitt’s distinction between friend and enemy cannot ground itself.

This dense argument—the deconstruction of the oppositions between war and peace, on the one hand, and friend and enemy on the other—is not a mere intellectual game. What I want to argue is that our normal ways of understanding these relationships are inadequate to at least our current historical circumstances. The idea that war and peace are mutually exclusive or identical with one another, fails to grasp the complexity of the situations of war with which we have to deal. Indeed, I want to argue that it is to a deconstructive Derridean logic that we must look if we want to understand the doubleness of the wars in which we find
ourselves. Our conventional accounts attempt to advance a purely moral logic: firstly, the programmatic idea that peace is separable from war and redeemable from it; the other, the sophisticated one that the corruption and cynicism of our institutions condemns us to war. Yet the wars we are involved in are ones in which the distinction between war and peace and between friend and enemy are not at all clear. We fight wars on behalf of civic values, like democracy and human rights, for example, that we consider the sweetest fruits of peace, while the disciplines of warfare end in the muting if not savaging of human rights at home. Similarly, our domestic politics have long been a zone in which the ordinary administration of social policy is imagined as warfare: we have had wars on poverty, on drugs and on crime, and more recently, with the war on terror, this logic has been projected across the whole of the earth.

Similarly, the distinction between friend and enemy is also irreducibly problematic: a figure like Saddam Hussein, for example, was both a bulwark against Iranian fundamentalism whose political crimes had to be explained away, and the re-incarnation of Hitler, to be overthrown and executed for the same crimes. A figure like this, however, is simply a sensational example of a much deeper problem: in asymmetrical warfare in particular, it’s not clear who in the civilian population you are fighting for and who you are fighting against. This is not simply the result of the inability to discern one from the other. There is a loss of separation between these categories to the point where civilians who are clearly non-combatants become targets of a generalised military terror using torture and rape, whose aim is to keep whole populations in a state of intimidation and neutralisation, designed to liberate them. We must attack you in order to defend you. The Vietnam era statement that the village needed to be destroyed in order to be saved is not a cataclysmic absurdity, but evidence of the deepest problematic of war.

The loss of difference between war and peace has been much commented upon. What we must not forget, however, following Derrida’s commentary on Levinas is that this relationship remains contradictory. Wars may be fought to advance democracy, for example, but only by radically unsettling, even transforming, democracy in the process. What we have here is not a false democracy, as so many critics would say, but something far more challenging: an armed democracy, one in which democracy is the continuous management of public freedom by violence, not a violence that functions as a transition phase to be outgrown, nor one that merely operates at the perimeter of the social, but as a permanent accompaniment to the democracy it both facilitates and threatens.

The deconstruction of the relationship between war and peace, or friend and enemy does not reduce these differences to identity. The distinction becomes unfixed and contingent, but difference remains, as an
irreducible disjunction. Wars are fought to expand democracy, and human rights that mutilate democracy in both the theatre of war and at home, are resisted in the name of democracy and human rights. This is not irony on the part of history, but must be seen as a fundamental clue to what democracy and human rights are for us, and what war is. Wars are provoked by democracy as part of its operation. Democracy is an armed concept. It does not simply use warfare, nor is war simply the transition we must go through in order to reach democracy. Democracy requires war. Derrida once famously wrote that there was no law which did not at some point rely on the idea that it would need one day to be enforced, by violence if necessary. When we express our frustration at countries where elections are rigged, gangsters empowered, women routinely raped, rights mocked, ideals prostituted, ethnic groups victimised and so on, we ask why someone doesn’t do something about it? Why doesn’t someone intervene? What we are asking, of course, is where is that person who will have the courage to mean what they say and advance democracy and human rights by force, by war? Yet, of course, it is not this simple: war and democracy are also anathema to one another. They facilitate one another perhaps, but they also threaten to ruin one another. Wars rely on patterns of violence, authority and hierarchy that are distinctly undemocratic, and democracy must police wars, defining and punishing atrocity, though, of course, the policing of wars could be seen simply to compound violence with violence. This double, entangled relationship between war, on the one hand, and democracy and human rights, on the other, is the problem, or the ‘enigma’ of our time, in Mario Perniola’s sense of a contradictory double in suspended co-existence. This co-excitation in contradiction is where we are now stuck in our conceptualisation of politics.

War is always defined in relation to something else, peace, love, friendship, or human rights, to take but a few examples. Yet, we cannot see war and whichever of these things it is defined against as simply either opposite to or the same as one another. The challenge that war proposes for us is that we must reconsider what we mean by these ‘others’ to war if we are to understand our historical problematic. If war is entangled in human rights and democracy, for example, both inspiring and limiting them, what exactly are democracy and human rights to us, and what will they be in an era in which competition for resources and the degradation of the environment could make warfare a permanent feature of our politics? Will democracy be recoverable from this complex, and if so, what will this armed democracy be?
Notes

2 ibid.

Bibliography


