

Marxism and war

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War for Marxism is not exactly a *concept*, but it is certainly a *problem*.^{*} While Marxism could not invent a concept of war, it could re-create it, so to speak – that is, introduce the question of war into its own problematic, and produce a Marxist critique of war, or a critical theory of warfare, war situations and processes, with a completely original content. In a sense, this could be conceived as a kind of *test* for the capacity of Marxism to establish itself as a genuinely independent discourse. There is a wealth of illuminating analysis in the history of Marxist thought concerning war in general and specific types of war. But something awkward happened: instead of helping to broaden the scope and confirm the coherence of Marxism, the problem of war instead produced a profoundly *deconstructive* effect, stretching Historical Materialism to its limits and showing that it could not really give an account of these limits.

But there is more than that: the intervention of Marxism in debates around war, therefore also *peace* and politics, has profoundly disturbed this traditionally symmetrical pattern by imposing the consideration of *revolution* as an additional term (and, to a large extent, ‘class struggles’ form only the background for the idea of revolution). The disturbing effects on the *concept of the political* are to be observed not only within Marxism itself but also within so-called ‘bourgeois’ theory. However, seen from the Marxist point of view, as expressed by Marx initially in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the *Communist Manifesto*, the concepts of *class struggle* and *revolution* are *not* political; they anticipate the ‘end of the political state’, or they suppress the *autonomy* of the political sphere. Conversely, at the end, the combination of ‘war’ and ‘revolution’ as realizations of, and obstacles to, the class struggle appear to be profoundly *unpolitical*. In other terms, not only does the understanding and managing of war remain a problem for Marxists, not only does it feature as a limit of Historical Materialism, but, through its confrontation with Marxism, the *unpolitical* character of war emerges into the open. This testifies to the

relevance of Marxism as one of the deepest attempts at theorizing politics and the political in modern times, but also it seems to indicate that a ‘Marxist’ solution, or an end to the riddles of any *politics of war*, remains inaccessible.

It is around these questions, and in order to investigate their implications, that I want to examine the articulation of Marxism and war by successively following three guiding threads, each of which confers a privilege upon certain authors and certain texts. Of course, they are not really independent, they continually overlap, but they deserve to be examined separately. These are, first, the problem of the conceptualization of class struggle in terms of a ‘civil war’ or a ‘social war’; second, the problem of the relationship between capitalism and war, and the ‘capitalist wars’, or the specific form, aims and political consequences of wars within capitalism, from a Marxist viewpoint. A third moment will be devoted to the problem of the historical relationship between revolution and war, and therefore the crucial issue of ‘revolutionary wars’, the dialectical tension between *the military* and *the political* elements within revolutionary processes or situations. This leads to disturbing questions concerning the reversal of revolutionary politics into counter-revolutionary politics through the militarization of revolutions.

Class struggle as civil war: a new concept of the political

The equation of the ‘class struggle’ (*Klassenkampf*) with a ‘civil war’ (*Bürgerkrieg*) was proposed in the *Communist Manifesto* and has had lasting consequences in and around Marxism. We need to understand where it came from, what it exactly meant, which difficulties it involved, which traces it left in the Marxist discourse, to become powerfully revived in the Leninist understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In turn, this Leninist revival is crucial if we want to interpret some of the dilemmas that structure political discourse today, especially in the form of what I will

^{*} This is the text of a paper presented to the seminar ‘Los Pensadores de la Crisis Contemporanea: Marx, Weber, Keynes, Schmitt’, Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, Valencia, 2–4 December 2009. It is a revised and somewhat shortened version of the entry ‘Krieg’ in Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Frigga Haug and Peter Jehle, eds, *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Volume 7/II: *Knechtschaft-Krisentheorien*, Argument Verlag, Berlin, 2009.

picture as the alternative between the ‘Schmittian’ and ‘Gramscian’ concepts of the political.

The saliency of this question has been enhanced in recent times by a provocative intervention of Michel Foucault. In his lectures at the Collège de France of 1976, he proposed that, from a critical and historical point of view, the well-known motto from Clausewitz’s *Vom Kriege* should be inverted: it is not, he writes, war that ought to be considered ‘a continuation (*Fortsetzung*) of politics by other means’, but rather *politics* itself that is *another form of war*.¹ In fact, Foucault says very little about Clausewitz, but he proposes a genealogy of the expression ‘class struggle’ which takes it back to historians who, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century, interpreted the hierarchies of feudal society and the opposition between aristocrats and bourgeois in terms of a ‘war of races’ arising out of conquest. He sees the notion of the ‘class struggle’ (which, notoriously, Marx never claimed that he had invented himself) as a late by-product of the transformation of the ‘war of races’, just like its rival in the nineteenth century on the counter-revolutionary side: the ‘race struggle’ (*der Rassenkampf*). This interpretation points at some of the background of the ‘invention’ of the class-struggle-based theory of world history in the *Communist Manifesto*, and in this sense it is useful. But it also somewhat distorts what is meant in the context and, surprisingly, seems to use *against Marx* something that he had precisely located at the centre of his theory, namely the idea of an *irreconcilable antagonism* – whose best name is precisely ‘war’ in a generalized sense.

We have to return to the actual formulations. The equation of the class struggle and a social or a civil war² results from two phrases, to be found at the beginning and the end of Chapter 1 of the *Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruination of the contending classes. ...

In depicting the most general phases of development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundations for the sway of the proletariat.³

This equation raises a number of exciting problems. First, concerning its immediate sources, which also determine part of its meaning. We know that the text of the *Manifesto* is a palimpsest: almost every phrase has been borrowed from previous authors, ancient or contemporary, but the result of their combination is strikingly new and original. In this case two contexts are particularly relevant. The very notion of *antagonism*, of Kantian rather than Hegelian origin, came through the *Exposition de la Doctrine Saint-Simonienne*, a crucial text which has also provided the binary patterns of ‘exploiting’ and ‘exploited’ classes, starting with slaveholders and slaves, and ending with capitalists and wage-labourers.⁴ But the Saint-Simoniens themselves adopted, or even systematized, the idea that would become one of the pillars of the ‘sociological tradition’, namely the idea that industrialization involves an overcoming of the military forms of domination in history, a tendency to replace war by commerce and production. Marx in a sense would *reverse* this conclusion, explaining that the Industrial Revolution and the process of proletarianization launched just another form of war. In doing this, he recurs to a terminology and a metaphoric discourse that have both a narrow and a wider background. Narrowly speaking it directly draws on the *Blanquist* discourse of the ‘guerre à mort entre les classes’ – that is, a neo-Jacobin discourse from which a few years later the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ will also derive.⁵ The wider background, equally important, concerns the whole discourse critical of the new industrial and bourgeois society in the 1840s in terms of ‘Two Nations’ fighting each other, as in Benjamin Disraeli’s novel,⁶ or in terms of ‘guerre sociale’ as in Honoré de Balzac, which we know was enormously influential on Marx and Engels.⁷

On the meaning of this formulation, I concentrate on three points:

1. Although Marx would understand it as a radical critique of the idea of ‘politics’, or the autonomy of politics as defined by party politics after the bourgeois revolutions, the war model for the class struggle undoubtedly involves *a new concept of the political*. It seems that the best way to understand this is to develop the text’s indication concerning an oscillation between ‘phases’ when the civil war is latent, or invisible, and other ‘phases’ when it becomes open or visible. *Politics* in the essential sense would precisely concern the transition from one phase to the other, the *becoming visible* of the latent struggle (therefore also its becoming

conscious, organized) – perhaps also the reverse. Therefore its leading to a *decision* in the social antagonism, called a ‘victory’ or a ‘defeat’ (and we should never forget the *third* disturbing possibility: *der gemeinsame Untergang der kämpfenden Klassen*, a ‘tragic’ case reminiscent of Hegelian formulations concerning the fall of the Ancient civilizations). It would be already very interesting to discuss correspondences between this concept of politics and the one that is involved in Clausewitz’s formula, although Marx and Engels at the time had not read him, but it is actually true that his ‘formula’ becomes here somehow inverted.

2. A representation of the class struggle as a long civil war, covering whole historical epochs and ultimately the whole course of history, implies that classes themselves are pictured as ‘camps’ or ‘armies’. Interestingly this representation of the classes as armies *pre-dates* any Marxian considerations on the *class-party*, or class-consciousness, which are subordinated to it.
3. Finally the idea is directly linked to the representation of a *polarization* of classes, and a *catastrophic* outcome of the economic process in capitalism. There is a complete teleology involved here. The more we progress in the history of class struggles towards modern capitalism, and the more we progress in the industrial revolution within capitalism itself, the more civil society becomes actually divided into radically exclusive antagonistic groups, *external* to one another, and the final confrontation will take place when the old social order is entirely dissolved and the bourgeois capitalists have reduced the proletariat to a desperate situation of starvation or revolt – that is, revolution.

All this was to leave profound traces in the Marxist discourse, and, as we will see, after a period of latency it would be reactivated in a new situation in which revolution and catastrophe appeared again closely interrelated. However, in the short run, it was rapidly dropped, and this dropping made the emergence of the Marxian critique of political economy and the Engelsian doctrine of ‘historical materialism’ possible: we have to understand why.⁸ My hypotheses are the following:

1. The equation of *Klassenkampf* and *Bürgerkrieg* had to be dropped because the revolutions and counter-revolution of 1848 to 1851 displayed a pattern of *actual* ‘civil wars’ in which the proletariat not only was defeated, but experienced the inadequacy of its representations of the relationship between crises

and class politics: the polarization worked in the opposite direction of communism. It also experienced the insufficiency of its understanding of state power and the state apparatus. As a consequence the relationship between the idea of a ‘class army’ and a ‘political party of the whole class’ tended to become reversed.

2. This tragic experience was repeated a number of times in the history of Marxism until today. But also: each new type of civil war would raise new problems concerning the class structure of civil wars, or the way they split and distort class structures.⁹
3. The great exception to this tendency concerns Lenin’s theory and practice of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* between 1918 and 1921. This revival has had incalculable consequences. Indeed a number of preliminaries would be necessary here, ranging from a discussion of successive understandings of the notion of the ‘dictatorship’ among Marxists to a description of the war conjuncture which prompted Lenin and the Bolsheviks to launch the motto of the ‘transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’. Suffice it here to indicate that the dictatorship of the proletariat is conceived by Lenin as a long ‘life and death struggle’ between the old and the new society, which combines military and administrative, violent or ‘terrorist’ and non-violent or mass ‘pedagogical’ tactics, therefore confronts the political leadership (or the party) with a permanent strategic dilemma.¹⁰ In many respects this class war is therefore also *a non-war, or an anti-war* – just as the state in the dictatorship of the proletariat is pictured *as a non-state, or an anti-state*, already in the course of its ‘withering away’.¹¹ And also many dialectical formulations actually cover inextricable riddles, such as how to combine an intensification of the proletarian ideology, which is necessary to forge the unity of the working class as an army, and secure its hegemony over the allied classes, with a progression towards a classless society.¹²
4. Ideally we should finish this first review with a description of the new dilemma that arises out of a reflection on this experience, which I would express in the emblematic form: *Carl Schmitt or Antonio Gramsci – which ‘post-Leninist’ concept of the political?* Not by chance, this alternative was particularly explored within Italian Marxism or post-Marxism in the 1980s and as a consequence also elsewhere under its influence. Schmitt, to be sure, is not a Marxist, but he had a profound understanding of certain aspects of Marxism, which in turn reacted

on Marxism as a political theory. This comes from the fact that he wanted to build a concept of the ‘political’ as *preventive counter-revolution*, in the form of a prevalence of the exterior enemy (i.e. the *national* enemy) over the internal enemy (the *class* enemy of the state), but in practice he knows that the suppression of the internal enemy must come first and has to be continuously repeated.¹³ As for Gramsci, his concept of the political is not based on the primacy of the notion of enemy (not even class enemy), but it remains tied to the model of war in a clear manner. The dictatorship of the proletariat becomes here the search for ‘hegemony’ and its strategic core concerns the different degrees in the ‘relationship of forces’, which culminate in the superiority of the ‘war of position’ over the ‘war of movement’, although this would depend on the circumstances and the structure of the society itself.¹⁴ Rather than a ‘suppression of the counter-revolution’, the ‘war of position’ is best described as an alternative to the ‘passive revolutions’ of the bourgeoisie which carry processes of modernization from above, while pushing back the ‘subaltern’ strata in the politically dominated function of a pure economic resource.

War and capitalism

I will need to be more than schematic on the second issue, which covers an enormous literature: *war and capitalism*, therefore the *historicity of war* from the point of view of ‘historical materialism’. Historical materialism is a creation of Engels – which is not to say that Marx rejected it. There are different ways of understanding where this general theory is rooted. One of them refers to the extension of the critique of political economy and the Marxian analysis of the capitalist mode of production into a complete scheme of interpretation of the ‘law of development’ of society and its dialectical transformation into another society or *Gesellschaftsformation*. But another one, equally decisive, refers to the necessity of providing an understanding of social processes that *complicate* the class struggle, or even seem to *reverse* its typical tendency, reducing them ‘in the last instance’ to the same principle of evolution. Two such critical problems are the problem of *religion* and the problem of *war*. Engels addressed them very seriously, especially the second, on which he certainly influenced Marx and played a leading role. This can be explained by his personal experience as an organizer in the military phase of the 1848 Revolution in Germany,¹⁵ but also by his special interest in concrete institutional history.

The ‘war’ which is now in question is not a *class war*, neither is it a ‘general’ or ‘generalized’ notion of violent antagonism: it is the *empirical war* – especially the *national war*, but also some times the *civil war*, for example, the American Civil War, which drew considerable attention from Marx. A quick look at the *Marx–Engels Werke* for the years between 1857 and 1870 will show that several volumes are entirely or almost entirely devoted to articles and essays on diplomacy and war inside and outside Europe,¹⁶ which Engels and Marx address simultaneously as European *democrats* (especially when they attack the counter-revolutionary order imposed by the alliance of Britain and Russia, later turned into rivalry) and as would-be leaders of an international working class which should emerge as an autonomous historical player. Add to this the full volume of descriptive and theoretical essays written by Engels for the *New American Cyclopaedia* on military categories and past examples of warfare.¹⁷ It is now time to grant this enormous textual corpus its full meaning and assess its role in the creation of historical materialism. But it is also necessary to discuss the extent to which it actually deconstructs the body of theory that it was supposed to build.

My hypothesis here will be that, with Engels, a first critical appropriation of the ideas and problems of Clausewitz’s *Vom Kriege* is taking place (and also of Clausewitz’s earlier book on the French-Russian War of 1812), which already acquires a constitutive function. Others will follow, each time shifting the accent to different aspects of what we might call Clausewitz’s ‘axiomatics’ of warfare, and sometimes *reversing* his interpretations, particularly for what concerns the crucial notions of the distinction between absolute and limited wars, the primacy of the ‘moral’ factor in modern wars, and the superiority of defensive strategies over offensive strategies in the long run, therefore allowing it to develop in a different manner the idea that war is a ‘continuation’ of politics by other means. Herfried Münkler speaks of a ‘Dialektik des Militarismus’ that Engels would have pursued all through his life, but he also draws our attention to the fact that, under the impact of the contemporary experiences which take us to the early phases of imperialism,¹⁸ Engels had to acknowledge that a ‘historical materialist’ conception of warfare did not lead to a universal assessment of its relationship to the class struggle, much less to a certainty concerning its role in the transition from capitalism to a classless society.

In Engels’s presentation of the dialectic of war and militarism, two different ‘contradictions’ interact: one concerns the influence of military technology on the

organization of armies and the changes in strategic models (analogous to the development of *productive forces*), and the effects of the incorporation of the people, or the masses, into conscription armies (analogous to *social relationships of production*). The other contradiction concerns the increasing role of nation-states and competition among nations, and its antagonistic relationship to the internationalization of economy and the development of internationalism among the working classes. Engels progressively moved from the idea that the race to technological improvements and new weaponry would reach an absolute limit, because it imposed an excessive financial burden on states, to the idea that the arms race was virtually as unlimited as the process of capitalist accumulation itself. And he moved from the conviction that conscription armies would transfer the class struggle within the core of the state apparatus itself to a more hesitant prognosis that the capacity to block the general war between rival capitalist states would depend on the working classes' own conversion from nationalism to internationalism. From this consideration, which brings a strong element of uncertainty into historical materialism, we can already anticipate Rosa Luxemburg's dilemma in 1914, when the Great 'European Civil War' of the twentieth century would break out in spite of the efforts of pacifists and socialists who had tried to mobilize the working classes of each country against their own governments: *Sozialismus oder Barbarei!*¹⁹

Let me indicate in a programmatic manner three other questions which should be associated with this general problem of a theory of war as constitutive of historical materialism:

1. After Engels the *Dialektik des Militarismus* becomes transformed into a theory of *imperialism*, in the form of the idea that when capitalism reaches the 'stage' of competition among dominant nations for the colonial appropriation of the world, militarism is no longer a mere consequence but also a motor of the historical development. (Ironically, this socialist idea, widely shared at the time, became later, in fascist states but also in 'Keynesian' liberalism, a *positive* assumption and programme for the capitalists themselves.) This reopened the question of the interaction between the political and the military, and questioned the definition of what is 'determining in the last instance'. The problem would become even more complicated after 'socialist states' had emerged as a consequence of the wars themselves and became major 'strategic players' in the confrontation between militarized state powers at world scale.
2. This leads to a second crucial question, which, as we know, was never really settled: the question of the *actual roots* and effective character of *internationalism*, which appeared as the form under which the exploited classes can impose a specific orientation on world politics – *or not*. Its 'reality test' was precisely met during the wars. What the *Communist Manifesto* had described as a *fait accompli*, namely the withering away of patriotism or nationalism within the proletariat, appeared now as a hazardous process open to antithetical evolutions. On the one hand it oscillated between *pacifism* (whose last brilliant exposition in Marxist terms may have been E.P. Thompson's theory of 'Exterminism' conceptualizing the programme of anti-nuclear social movements²⁰) and so-called *revolutionary defeatism*, particularly advocated in the Trotskyite tradition.²¹ On the other hand, it became profoundly disturbed by the fact that the masses under consideration were not the similar working classes of equally developed capitalist states, but rather the *dissimilar* populations of countries and regions on either side of the great colonial and post-colonial divide, with divergent ideologies and perhaps also, to a large extent, irreconcilable interests.²²
3. Finally we cannot avoid a discussion of the outcome that the idea of a 'materialist' theory of warfare and its historical function has found in the Soviet military doctrine. The military institution came as a result of the Civil War, when Trotsky and others founded the Red Army and devised its strategy. Given the importance it had acquired at the heart of the Soviet state, already before World War II, but above all after the costly victory in the 'Great Patriotic War' against Nazi Germany, and the constitution of a political–military–industrial complex practically ruling the country and its satellites during the Cold War, it is not surprising that the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* in its successive editions presented a complete treatment of the question of war, where Clausewitz's formula was canonized.²³

The historical-critical examination of the effects of warfare on Marxist theory thus takes us back to the issue of internationalism. Drawing part of its inspiration from classical cosmopolitanism, but striving to disentangle its ties with utopia, internationalism was presented in the *Communist Manifesto* as an *actual tendency* in history: 'militarism' and 'nationalism' being in fact already 'past' (an idea which clearly reflects the Saint-Simonian influence), they would be unable to affect the revolutionary class struggle from inside. This question proved to be in fact not a

speculative but a *political problem*, extremely difficult to solve but also increasingly central from the point of view of the class struggle itself. This cannot be separated from the change in the function of *nations* and the perception of their historical role. Indeed the combination of social and national liberation movements in the century-long process of decolonization led to a completely new understanding of the articulation of the class and national factors of history, and a revived internationalism both in theory and organization, from the times of the *komintern* to those of the *tricontinental* and beyond. This now also belongs to the past, and calls for a critical examination, when the liberated colonies or semi-colonies have become in turn nationalistic or militaristic powers. But it shows the importance of discussing a third crucial aspect of the problem of 'war and politics' in Marxism, which is concerned with the forms and effects of *revolutionary war*.

War and revolution

In a sense, we arrive only now at what constitutes the 'heart' of the problem. The two lines that we have considered separately: class struggle as a (generalized) 'civil war', and militarism as an expression of capitalism, merge into one single practical question: how to 'make' the revolution? More concretely: how did the Marxists make and think the revolutions they were involved in, and which was their essential objective? Ideally we should here consider the whole of *modernity* as a great 'cycle' of historical transformations, where Marxism tried to insert itself as a 'revolution within revolution', until we reach the moment of 'post-modernity' – that is, the emergence of 'new wars', in part or totally *post-national*. Whether they still can be addressed from a classical Marxist point of view is a question all the more intriguing because, in many respects, their concept was historically elaborated by *turning around* certain revolutionary theories against their original intention.

The problems of 'revolutionary war' can be traced back at least to the French Revolution and its effects on the European political order. It created prototypes for all the subsequent elements of the debate: the 'defensive war' against an offensive counter-revolution; the creation of a new type of 'popular' army where the discipline and the fighting spirit are based on ideology and not only on command (hence the emergence of 'political commissioners' or the renewal of the ancient notion of 'dictatorship', in Schmittian terms); the confrontation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces combining social and ideological motivation

(with 'insurrectional' moments on both sides – the *Terreur* and the *Vendée*); the birth of the notions of 'partisan war' and 'guerrilla warfare' whose revolutionary character was immediately an issue, since in Russia, Spain and Germany it was waged against the 'revolutionary nation' turned imperialist, and so on. In a sense, Marxism never crossed the limits of this typically 'modern' paradigm, but it continuously tried to transform it or rearticulate it. The relationship to the revolutionary use of war became the criterion after which it should be asked whether the concept of 'revolution' itself had a univocal meaning. For the French ('bourgeois') Revolution, war seemed to be only an accident, but this accident changed its outcome, above all by transforming it into a system of territorial conquest, but also by re-creating and further expanding what in the *18th Brumaire* Marx calls the 'State Machine'. For some Marxists, war became the privileged *revolutionary way* to classless society: but which war? Or war used in which manner? Two tendencies emerged, conceptually opposed if not always historically separated: the revolutionary *war of the masses* (including the 'guerrilla' war, rural or urban), and the *mass resistance to war*, a revolutionary 'war against war' as it were, waged from inside.

We find these orientations mainly in the work of Lenin during the 1914–17 period, and the work of Mao Zedong during the 'popular war' led by the Chinese Communist Party against the Japanese occupation. In both cases it was associated with a striking return to some of the Clausewitzian axioms, now transferred into a completely different framework. This was prepared by Engels, who simultaneously criticized Clausewitz's allegedly 'idealistic' emphasis on moral factors, and sought a materialist equivalent, which would prove compatible with an insistence on the technological, economic and social factors of the wars. This equivalent was found in the idea that people's armies, or mass conscription, would potentially introduce the class struggle within the army itself, thus reversing Clausewitz's typical fear of the masses in military matters into a prophecy of their emerging as new strategic actors against the state and its military machine. But it was only with Lenin and Mao Zedong that this dialectical principle would lead to a new articulation of war and politics, displacing the Clausewitzian combination from the state–army–people unity to a new historical unity of class, people and revolutionary party.

Lenin, as we know, intensively read Clausewitz, taking notes and writing marginal commentaries on his *Vom Kriege* after the collapse of the Second International and its pacifist agenda. He drafted and success-

fully tried to implement (at least in his own country) the motto of the ‘transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’, which describes the ‘moral factor’ (the internationalist class consciousness) as the *political result over time* of the horrors of a ‘popular’ war (i.e. waged by mass national armies). It gives a completely original interpretation of the idea of an ‘offensive’ prepared from within the ‘defensive’, deriving its necessity from the fact that ‘absolute’ warfare with time *becomes* untenable. It must therefore re-create the conditions of class politics at the expense of the state, which in a sense could incarnate politics only as long as it also retained the capacity to arm the people and control its use of the arms it receives, but would become a political phantom as soon as it would be deprived of this capacity. Or, one might say, as history moves from the state monopoly of legitimate violence to the class monopoly of historically decisive violence. I submit that this displacement of Clausewitz forms one of the starting points of Schmitt’s *unpolitical concept of the ‘political’* – where sovereignty is identified with the capacity to install a ‘state of exception’ in the core of the state, in order to repress the class struggle in a *preventive* manner, so that the definition of the ‘internal enemy’, the enemy of the ‘class civil war’, is used to re-create the monopoly of the state and its capacity to wage external wars.

But it is only in Mao Zedong’s theory of the ‘protracted war of partisans’ that we find what can be considered at the same time a Marxist rescuing of Clausewitz’s concept of war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’ and an alternative to Clausewitz’s idea of the political. In fact I tend to believe not only that Mao Zedong was the most consistent Clausewitzian in the Marxist tradition,²⁴ but that he was perhaps the most consistent Clausewitzian *absolutely speaking* after Clausewitz, because he re-interpreted *all* his axioms, and not only one or two of them. We now know that, after the end of the ‘Long March’, while at Yen-an in 1938, Mao had organized a special seminar on the work of Clausewitz, for which he even had part of *Vom Kriege* translated into Chinese.²⁵ Mao’s key idea is that the defensive strategy imposed by the fact that, initially, the imperialist adversary and the ruling bourgeoisie have armies whereas the proletariat and the peasants have none will in the end become reversed into its opposite, and lead to the actual annihilation of the ‘strongest’ at the hands of the ‘weakest’. (It would also be important here to investigate if Mao’s strategic thinking does not have also roots in traditional Chinese philosophy and historiography.) So the length of the war, the dialectical equivalent of the Clausewitzian



‘friction’ now called ‘protracted war’, is the time needed for the tiny nucleus of revolutionary workers and intellectuals who have sought refuge within the masses of the peasantry to achieve simultaneously a triple result: (1) to arm themselves at the expense of the adverse forces by performing local guerrilla attacks against isolated detachments of the invading army; (2) to ‘learn’ the art of strategy by expanding the theatre of war to the national level; (3) finally, to ‘solve the contradiction in the people’ and separate the people from its enemies, by transferring hegemony from an external power to an immanent power, representing the common interest of all national dominated classes. The communist party is supposed to be (and to remain over a long period) precisely that immanent power.

The blind spot of this analysis seems today rather clear, namely the fact that the international global context of World War II is practically ignored, as if only the *national* forces would count strategically in the anti-imperialist struggle. ‘Self-reliance’, the great Maoist motto, has a latent nationalist dimension, which was not without consequences for the subsequent development of the Chinese Revolution. But the result remains impressive in terms of a new historical interpretation of the political rationality of war and its political subject. So, in a sense, we have come full circle, and it is not by chance, probably, that the closure of this circle consists in the reversal of the hierarchical relationship between institutional warfare waged by the state and popular guerrilla warfare.

To what extent does this reversal ‘resolve’ the aporias affecting Clausewitz’s model of ‘escalation to the extremes’ in conventional wars? It rather displaces them: Clausewitz’s difficulty came from the fact that the state could not be said *a priori* to have become the absolute master of the ‘instrument’ it had to build and

use in the course of the transformation of wars into ‘absolute wars’ – that is, wars waged by the people in arms. Mao’s difficulty, or the difficulty we read in Mao with hindsight, comes from the fact that the immanent power of the organization which transforms a people into an army, namely the revolutionary party, can completely perform the strategic reversal and remain a political agency only by *becoming a state itself* (even if a state periodically *destroyed and reconstructed* by revolutionary episodes, in the Maoist vision taught during the ‘Cultural Revolution’). The only thinkable alternative – very unlikely in the circumstances of a war of national liberation – would be that it *refrained* from ‘taking power’, or carrying on the revolutionary war until the ‘final’ goal (*Zweck*), which is the complete destruction of the enemy – thus somehow ‘scaling down’ the war from ‘absolute’ to ‘limited’. But the *subject* of the strategic process remains in every case a *split subject*, or a subject oscillating between sovereignty and insurrection. Some modern theoreticians and commentators of ‘molecular wars’ (Enzensberger) or ‘imperial wars’ (Hardt and Negri) solve the aporia by simply eliminating the category of the subject, or reducing it to *negative* or *defective* figures (such as ‘the multitude’). But in this case it remains to be explained how the category of ‘war’ itself can be maintained, except metaphorically.

It is also notable that these questions became central in the debates around ‘guerrilla warfare’ which came to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Latin America after the victory of the Cuban Revolution and the attempts at expanding its ‘model’ into a project of continental (or even multi-continental) anti-imperialist networks of local partisan hotbeds (*focos*).²⁶ Many episodes of this recent history remain obscure, not only because personal controversies and betrayals are still haunting contemporary assessments of the outcome and the legacies of the revolutionary cycle that, in the end, was crushed by a combination of military dictatorship, US intervention, divisions and political adventurism from inside, but because many of the debates remain abstract, ignoring the extent to which each episode of militarized class struggle was in fact a continuation of local and national histories under other names. This is essential to understanding the interferences from movements and ideologies of another descent which, in fact, considerably displaced or affected the Marxist discourse from the inside. Such was clearly the case, in Latin America, with ‘political theology’ in the broad sense, particularly in the form of ‘Liberation Theology’, for example. Without such interference, one would not understand the emergence, in a more

recent period, of ‘post-military’ guerrilla movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas, which have pushed the Clausewitzian notion of the ‘defensive strategy’ to the extreme, reacting to an increasing militarization of the dominant social order and its preventive counter-revolutionary techniques waging terror against social movements by willingly dissociating popular resistance from the seizing of state power – thus giving a new and unexpected content to the Gramscian idea of a ‘war of position’ in terms of political ‘self-restraint’.

Ethics, politics, anthropology

In the early twenty-first century, many of the questions evoked above seem now to belong to an irreversibly past era, together with the dialectical terminology in which they were discussed. ‘New Wars’, combining sophisticated technologies with ‘archaic’ savagery, external interventions with ‘civil’ or endogenous antagonisms, are everywhere in the global world around us. They seem to be reviving a ‘Hobbesian’ pattern of *war of all against all* rather than a Marxian primacy of class determinism, except that this pattern of generalized antagonism does not come *before* the institution of the modern state with its ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’, but rather *after* it. It is ‘post-institutional’.²⁷ However, even when the wars involve a significant factor of resistance to imperialist conquest or domination, they have no specific ‘revolutionary’ content or prospect, but rather a nationalist, religious or cultural one.

This is not to say that the large cycle of Marxist elaborations, continuously intertwining the categories of politics, war and revolution, have lost all interest. First, they teach a political lesson: more than 150 years after the *Communist Manifesto*, the ‘peaceful strategy’ (and more radically, the strategy of pacifist, anti-militarist revolution) and the strategy of ‘armed revolution’, the *arms of critique and the critique of arms*, have both failed to destabilize capitalism. It is only capitalism, apparently, that destabilizes itself by developing gigantic areas of social anarchy, or *anomie*. This could suggest that the problem of revolutionary transformation was ill-formulated. More precisely it would suggest that, for revolutions, ‘war’ is not a *strategy*, or a strategic instrument, but rather a *condition*, an *element*, so that any ‘revolutionary’ perspective – in the sense of radical social transformation – has to address its permanent structures of extreme violence just as it has to address the permanent structures of exploitation. If ‘war’ is a *boundary* or a *limit* (*Grenze*) of historical materialism (as is ‘religion’, partly for the same reasons), it could become also a *condition of possibility* for its renewal (or perhaps its transcendence), provided

the initial equation of class struggle and civil war be displaced and reconceptualized in terms of the contribution of the class struggle and exploitation processes to a general economy of violence to which other factors also contribute. As a consequence, ‘wars’ in their different forms are always already ‘normal’ means of politics, but the quest of ‘other means’ to make politics is permanent, and potentially subversive.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–6*, trans. David Macey, Penguin, London, 2004.
2. It is only in a very few places (especially in the 1851 brochure *The Class Struggles in France*) that Marx also used the expression ‘class war’ (*Klassenkrieg*).
3. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Collected Works*, Volume 6, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, pp. 477–512.
4. A. Bazard et O. Rodrigues, *Exposition de la Doctrine Saint-Simonienne, Première année* (1829), ed. Maurice Halbwachs, Marcel Rivière, Paris, 1924.
5. This is the genealogy that Eduard Bernstein was eager to criticize at the end of the century (*Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus*, 1899) in order to draw a line of demarcation between the rational and the prophetic sides of Marxism. Indeed the rejection of the *civil war analogy* for the understanding of the class struggle will become foundational for the so-called ‘reformist’ wing of Marxian socialism.
6. Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or the Two Nations* (1845): ‘Two Nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.’
7. Honoré de Balzac, *Les paysans. Scènes de la vie de campagne* (written in 1844, published in 1855).
8. There is *one exception*, however, to this dropping of the formula equating ‘class struggle’ and ‘civil war’: the passage in *Capital, Volume I*, which describes the struggles in early-nineteenth-century Britain for the legal limitation of the working day as a ‘long and rude civil war, more or less hidden, between the capitalist class and the working class’: it is indeed crucial for a complete discussion of the ‘war model of the political’ in Marx. See ‘Fin de la politique ou politique sans fin? Marx et l’aporie de la “politique communiste”’, my contribution to the conference A 160 años del Manifiesto Comunista. Relecturas del pensamiento de Marx, Universidad Diego Portales y Universidad Arcis, Santiago de Chile, 26–28 November 2008, http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/seminaires/philosophie/macherey/macherey20082009/Balibar_17122008.html.
9. This is true even for the recent idea of the ‘molecular civil war’ proposed by Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1993.
10. See V.I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, 1920.
11. Of course this was entirely blurred in the *institutionalized* form of the dictatorship of the proletariat created by Stalin.
12. Here we must lament the fact that, due to her murder at the hands of fascist paramilitaries commissioned by the socialist government in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg could not join a debate on these policies: she had supported the Russian Revolution against its reformist critics while implicitly rejecting the model of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a ‘protracted civil war’.
13. Carl Schmitt, *Die geistgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 1923; *Der Begriff des Politischen* 1927/1932.
14. Antonio Gramsci, ‘Situazioni. Rapporti di forza’, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 2, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Edizione critica dell’Istituto Gramsci, Turin, Einaudi, 1975, pp. 1578–88.
15. Which earned him the nickname ‘General’ among his family and friends. Cf. Friedrich Engels, *Revolution und Konterrevolution in Deutschland, 1851–1852*, *Marx–Engels Werke*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1988, Bd.8, S.5–108.
16. The Crimean War, the wars of Italy and Austria, Austria and Germany, Germany and France, the colonial expeditions in Afghanistan and China, etc.
17. Friedrich Engels: articles from 1860 for the *New American Cyclopaedia* (see vol. 14 of *Marx–Engels Werke*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1961).
18. And the first steps into the direction of World War I, which he correctly anticipated. See Herfried Münkler, *Über den Krieg. Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretischen Reflexion*, Velbrück Wissenschaft, Weilerswist, 2002.
19. Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie* (1914), *Gesammelte Werke*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1975 (‘Junius-Broschüre’).
20. See E.P. Thompson, *Exterminism and Cold War*, Routledge, London, 1982.
21. Rudolf Klement, ‘Les tâches du prolétariat pendant la guerre’ (1937), www.pouvoir-ouvrier.org/archives/klement.html.
22. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris, Maspero 1961; Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, *La guerra de guerrilla*, Imprenta Nacional, Havana 1960.
23. ‘The Marxist-Leninist theory of war considers the character of every war dependent on its political content’ – where ‘political’ refers to class and states interests. *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, 3rd edition, Moscow, 1970–78.
24. As several commentators have acknowledged, including Raymond Aron, *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976.
25. I owe these indications to Christof Ohm, who revised my article for the HKWM. He refers to the Ph.D. thesis by Z.Yuan-Lin, *Mao Zedong und Carl von Clausewitz. Theorien des Krieges. Beziehung, Darstellung und Vergleich*, Dissertation, Universität Mannheim, 1995.
26. The related strategic controversies inseparably concerned the issue of the ‘class base’ of the anti-imperialist insurrection, therefore the kind of genealogy that linked it to the age-old traditions of popular rebellions and illegalities, and the alternative of a pure ‘political leadership’ (subordinating the armed detachments of the revolution) or a ‘military-political leadership’ in which the political ‘temporarily’ took the form of a *military command*, thus pitting a ‘Maoist’ against a ‘Castrist’ (in practice, rather a Guevarist) conception of the revolutionary war. Régis Debray, *Révolution dans la révolution*, Maspero, Paris, 1967; *La critique des armes I et II*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1974.
27. Cf. Giacomo Marramao, *Dopo Il Leviatano. Individuo e comunità*, Bollati-Boringhieri, Turin, 2000.