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Contemporary Challenges for a Philosophical Theory of War
An Exposé

The aim of this exposé is to present eight cardinal challenges that a contemporary theory of war – or 'warlike violence', as we prefer to say – needs to confront. We propose first to elucidate these challenges, unfold their guiding questions, and to expose them to critical debate. Only in a second step might we then begin to consider possible *answers* to these questions – a desideratum that hopefully will help further justify this project, and reach far beyond its initial parameters. The proposed sections of the work are as follows:

- (1) The triple challenge of a philosophy of 'warlike violence' (*kriegerische Gewalt*)
- (2) Tasks of philosophical *theoría*: *Conditio humana* and polemology
- (3) Phenomenology of war, hermeneutics of war, and practical philosophy
- (4) 'Apocalyptic' phenomanality vs. learning comprehension
- (5) Tasks concerning the critique of illusions & disillusioning this critique
- (6) Warlike violence vs. the political
- (7) Phantasms of victory and their surrogates
- (8) Beyond the 'Politics of annihilation': On the future of the political

Traditionally viewed, topics such as 'Being' and the 'Good' have been counted among the core, classical themes of philosophy. 'War,' surprisingly, has not, even though it bears a deep and dark philosophical quality in its threatening capacity to affect and possibly *destroy* the entirety of human affairs – be it in terms of extinction, annihilation, or whatsoever kind of disastrous 'destructiveness' we might imagine. Given these various, disastrous forms, we argue that 'warlike violence' must be understood as the most important and pressing challenge for practical philosophy today – and this alongside problems like climate change, global justice, or a neoliberal maelstrom of globalization spinning out of control. Indeed, a global, cosmopolitan society, the development of which seems to be part and parcel of our beloved late-

modern social imaginaries, will have no chance of development as a reliable political reality if the threat of 'warlike violence' is not sufficiently countered, or at least held in abeyance.¹

(1) Yet in dealing theoretically with phenomena and conceptions of war in such a situation we are confronted with a threefold challenge. We must clarify (a) what it means to be 'exposed to warlike violence'; (b) how such a situation has become possible and still can become possible; (c) how the recurrence of warlike violence be avoided in future (yet without falling prey to the dialectical interplay of countering violence with violence, even if it be with a 'good conscience'). That all these challenges might be addressed, however, is based upon an important assumption figuring in the background: that the violence in question indeed always calls for explanation and intervention into the constant threat that one inadvertently and indifferently acquiesce to such violence and to the 'murderous consent' (A. Camus) that results from it.² It is exactly this most basic assumption, however, that is far from evident. If one starts to realize how fragile and questionable this assumption in fact is, it rather turns out that we do not even agree from where the exploration of 'war-like violence' should proceed. In other words, we don't even share an understanding of where the 'reign of war' begins and how it has always already impregnated our habits of understanding both war and peace.

¹ The disconcerting absence of war from the mainstream accounts in social and political philosophy is something that we can just note here. It calls for a 'negativistic account' that overcomes a certain Platonic remainder in these contexts that insists on the existence of ideas like 'the just' and 'the Good' as a kind of integrating horizon for thought. This deep-rooted prejudice implies the tendency to conceive of violence, of all sorts, as a mere 'childhood sickness' (Rawls), 'irrational opacity' (Habermas) or institutional hangover that will, in the last analysis, be done away with, be it in teleological, procedural, or discursive ways – a tendency that is truly incapable of confronting the inherently ambiguous, yet constitutive role of such negativity. First indications on how a 'negativistic social philosophy' might look have been proposed by the contributions collected in *Profile negativistischer Sozialphilosophie*, ed. B. Liebsch, H.R. Sepp, & A. Hetzel, Berlin: De Gruyter 2011; a concise discussion concerning the inherently ambiguous role of violence in the way contemporary philosophy understands itself in its time is offered by Ann V. Murphy, *Violence and the philosophical imaginary*, New York: SUNY Press.

² The topic of indifference, which indeed is of paramount importance for the overall context of our arguments offered here, has been treated in depth in Marc Crépon's important book *Le consentement meurtrier*, Paris: Cerf 2012 (Engl. Tr., *Murderous Consent. On the Accommodation of Violent Death*, New York: SUNY Press 2019). On the 'dialectics' of human *sensibility* that may give rise to such indifference, see B. Liebsch, *Menschliche Sensibilität. Inspiration und Überforderung*, Weilerwist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.

(2) Given these questions, does philosophical *theoria* still have discrete tasks? Are the detailed disputes on the issue not already taking place in many other disciplines? In fact, the tasks mentioned frequently hold premises beyond explanation in debates about war in the cultural sciences and the humanities; yet when investigated more closely, they appear – together with the afore-mentioned assumption – to be radically questionable. And indeed, the very assumption as such does not fit together at all with the plain observation that human beings ruthlessly expose each other to 'warlike violence', both without properly understanding it and without being able to foreclose its repetition.

All this points to how we can at least preliminarily conclude that 'warlike violence' is, in an almost incurable fashion, tied to the *human condition*, and that it affects everyone – whether as victim or perpetrator; as docile executor or merely systemically involved 'nobody'; as obligated military servant or peace worker. Are we obliged to live a life which, externally regarded, seems to unfold in civilized ways but ultimately are the incubators for the next war already looming?³ This could indeed not be otherwise, given that peace and wars by their very definition alternate in history (and the progress projected into it) and hence seem to emerge from each other.

One would not be wrong to doubt that philosophy has anything new to say about these fatal prospects. In this regard, Bernhard Taureck explicitly spoke about "the bankruptcy of philosophy in the face of the ills of war." Can philosophy be used to explicate some 'logos' of war that could assure 'the unity of some gathering, conjoined with a language that would be capable of expressing this gathering' ("als Einheit einer Sammlung, verbunden mit einer Sprache, die diese Einheit aussagt"⁴)? And if so, which tasks would such a *philosophical polemology* consequently have to address? In any case, if this approach at seems possible, it must not content itself with an all too easy overreliance upon Heraclitus' dark ponderings, as we find effectively at work in thinkers like Heidegger, Fink, or Patočka. Furthermore, it also must not resign itself to the fatalist insight that history only teaches us that in fact we cannot learn anything from war; an insight we easily find in, or perhaps more appropriately read into, Hegel.

³ See for an exemplary analysis of this tendency, J. Patočka, *Heretical essays in the philosophy of history*, Chicago: Open Court 1999, most notably the 6th essay, 'The wars of the twentieth century and the twentieth century as war', pp. 119-38.

⁴ B. H. F. Taureck, *Drei Wurzeln des Krieges. Und warum nur eine nicht ins Verderben führt. Philosophische Linien in der Gewaltgeschichte des Abendlandes*, Zug: Die Graue Edition 2019, 265.

(3) 'Warlike violence' shows itself in a variety of forms, which cannot be reduced to Heraclitus' *pólemos*. In this case that which has shown itself is under question, most notably in its very speakability and inheritability. While this definitely raises an essential question concerning the very givenness of this spectral phenomenon at hand, it must not mislead us to abandoning the question as to what we still might *learn* from it.⁵ If and how 'warlike violence' 'shows itself' is the leading question of a *phenomenology of war*. How that which shows itself can be 'expressed' (by way of saying, narrating, explicating, etc.) concerns a *hermeneutics of war*. Such hermeneutics then, for its part, challenges *practical philosophy* since it concerns the very question of if and how we may distinguish, face, and confront such violence, namely in the future. These three complexes of questions may of course be separated for heuristic reasons only. In fact, they need to be deployed in their intrinsic interrelation if we are right in assuming that 'warlike violence' necessarily calls for explanation and indeed prohibits *per se* that we might ever indifferently accept or condone it. That, however, something can, without further ado, be *learned* from such violence – this is an assumption we can no longer accept.

(4) In this context, it seems worth mentioning that the very concept of 'learning' apparently is ambiguous. In fact, retrospective insights into the 'eruption' of wars do not necessarily entail that such information will help us to really avoid wars in future. This is something that also Hegel emphasized clearly: understood exactly in terms of a phenomenon, which does not lead to a (at times recognizable) phylogenetic process of learning, war became a driving force in Hegel's account of history⁶ – of course by presuming that one 'looks at the world rationally' (*sieht sie vernünftig an*).

When Hegel talks about the 'eye of the concept, of reason' (*Auge des Begriffs, der Vernunft*⁷), which he entrusted to do justice to the historic significance of 'warlike violence',

⁵ Vgl. H. Münkler, *Der große Krieg. Die Welt 1914–1918*, Reinbek: Rowohlt 2015, 776, 785 ff.

⁶ See the instructive explications concerning Hegel's understanding of war in M. Mori, "Krieg und Frieden in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie." In *Machtpolitischer Realismus und pazifistische Utopie*, ed. H. Joas & H. Steiner, Frankfurt on the Main: Suhrkamp 1989, 49-91.

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte Bd. I. Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, Hamburg: Meiner 1955, 31 and 32, resp. the English translation by L. Rauch, *Introduction to the Philosophy of history*, Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett 1988, 14; the second quote is, by the way, not to be found in this English translation. Regarding the 'eye of reason', it might be noteworthy to remember Huxley's comment, which seems all the more pertinent as it refers to the fact that not only the 'sleep of reason' might produce monsters (Goya), but also a syndromatically hyper-active posture it is prone to adapt; the trope of *holiday*, therefore, is more than poignant: 'To the eye of reason, I repeat it, it certainly seems strange. But then the majority of human actions are not meant to be looked at with the eyes of

he refers to a kind of conceptual 'seeing' that still presupposes that this violence at least shows itself. If such violence, however, shows itself only in an 'apocalyptic fashion' to those who fall prey to it, we need to ask what that in fact means for the *phenomenality of war*. How should we conceive of it if its 'apocalyptic' mode of manifestation annihilates its targets or at least relegates them to the status of traumatized survivors?

If 'warlike violence' tends towards a 'delimited lawlessness' (Taureck) and hence points beyond all understanding and comprehension, all theory here necessarily seems to go awry. If in order to assess what 'warlike violence' is about, how indeed may we measure its impact in the face of suffering and destruction, concepts that, by definition, *tend toward the extreme*? May we hence even talk about war (philosophically) without accommodating these extremes? Can we even do so, without insinuating in a most questionable way the experienciability, expressability, representability, intelligibility and comprehensibility of the extreme *as such*? And, finally, *must* philosophy content itself with the option of being able to only indirectly testify to that which thinking will never be able to reach, as Lyotard famously claimed?⁸

(5) Philosophical thinking, it seems, cannot approach 'warlike violence' without confronting the tasks of both a *critique of illusions* as well as of a *disillusioning of this kind of critique*, too. Do, perhaps, our insinuations of a basic expressability, representability, and narrative convertibility only embody some dear illusions? And if yes, in what way? Is the assumption that we can learn something distinct from the experience and narrative representation of 'warlike violence' necessarily an illusion?⁹ Doesn't the very concept of violence display an all too broad heterogeneity – extending, e.g., unto the 'new wars' (Mary Kaldor, Herfried Münkler), which indeed privatize, asymmetrize, de-militarize, and secretize 'warlike violence' to such a degree that it most disconcertingly transforms into a 'social condition' (Kaldor)? Isn't it thereby, in the last analysis, rendered unrecognizable?¹⁰ Is 'war' in such cases then only changing its faces (like the chameleon Clausewitz spoke about) or is it rather changing in

reason.' (A. Huxley, *Jesting Pilate. An Intellectual Holiday*. New York: George H. Doran Company 1948, 47)

⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *Das Inhumane*, Vienna: Passagen ³2006, 223 (Engl. Tr., *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, tr. by G. Bennington & R. Bowlby, London: Blackwell 1993).

⁹ B. H. F. Taureck, B. Liebsch, *Drohung Krieg. Sechs philosophische Dialoge zur Gewalt der Gegenwart*, Wien, Berlin: Turia + Kant 2020.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1999; H. Münkler, *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Rowohlt 2015, 210 f., 243.

nature?¹¹ And if we are to answer positively that its nature is change (and there are good reasons to do so), wouldn't it thus be really illusory if we wanted to learn something of lasting value from it?

A similar question arises if we consider to what extent virtual war and real war, waged both in close existential proximity and in wired distance, also are something that *fascinate*, too – and that our strategies of disillusioning thus far have not helped us to do anything about this fact. Descending generations may always be open to that fascination, something that induces again and again the well-known illusions, apparently without having learned anything from the plights of war. But given this, isn't it really illusory to even count on strategies of disillusioning? Isn't the belief in disillusion perhaps the most tenacious illusion? That may definitely be true specifically for virtual or phantasy-worlds. Politically regarded, however, we must not so easily give up such strategies of disillusioning since specific illusions indeed have proven to be ruinous for the political as such. With an eye to this larger context, let it suffice to mention only some further points of application.¹²

(6) War is not the 'mere continuation of politics by other means', or accomplished by the 'addition of other means', as Clausewitz described it; 'warlike violence' rather stands for *failed* politics. Quite ironically, however, failed politics as such is brought about in political ways, albeit in such a way that it at once coats this very failure. Only under this presumption can one intend to defeat enemies in a 'destructive' (or even 'annihilating') way, while refusing to avow that this in fact ruins every possible political relationship. Consequently, the destruction of the political would always already be present within the political if one agrees with Clausewitz' continuation 'by other means' thesis. In truth, however, such means cannot be controlled at all – as Arendt already warned early on--but rather, in their warlike character, tend toward the extreme, with the consequence that they threaten the political. From this it follows that 'destructive' victories are not a meaningful political aim at all – a lesson that one may already derive, for example, from Thucydides or Plato's reflections on war.

(7) Notwithstanding these insights, such victories are regularly promised as something that can be achieved by way of waging war. Yet the idea of some 'final' victory is but a phantasm, something actually impossible, which would indeed resolve the intrinsic relationship be-

¹¹ C. v. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Frankfurt/M., Berlin: Ullstein ⁴1994, 36; H. Münkler, *Über den Krieg. Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretischen Reflexion*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft ³2004, 10, 103.

¹² Cf. also Taureck & Liebsch, *Drohung Krieg*, op. cit.

tween enmity, war, and victory. It is an illusion that one may be able to outplay enmity in a political fashion by way of 'warlike violence', which would destroy others in large numbers and perhaps annihilate them (or finally even otherness as such) in order to claim a final victory over one's enemies. One may wage war and defeat enemies – but never *enmity* as such; doing so rather destroys the political and abandons our chances to control the means "in use" as well.

Furthermore, there can also be no question about victory today since the massive use of highly developed – especially nuclear – weapons would leave no country intact and habitable. Their devastation would also affect the supposed victor. That 'Nobody can win', as D. D. Eisenhower held, is definitely true for nuclear war, a war for which nobody can specify the threshold beyond which such a war lurks and possibly escalates. Conventional wars, however, that are fought beyond this threshold raise the question to what extent they may still result in victories that will not immediately be put into question again by some superior violence. Wouldn't it be necessary therefore to reflect much more about the *impossibility to win at all* than about thinkable victories?

Without a doubt, the Nazi armies had been defeated in a war waged with conventional weapons. But even in this instance of an – at a first glance--unambiguous example of a successful victory, we need to further inquire as to who or what had been defeated, and how that had taken place. The Nazi 'Wehrmacht' and the 'Third Reich' were, without a doubt, defeated; but not Nazism as such, which has already recovered in several countries.

Understandably, the term 'Endsieg', which was worn out by the Nazis, is no longer used by anyone today. Radical enemies like terrorists, however, are once again threatened today with an *infinite justice*, which, however, manifests itself in never ending forms of persecution and the concomitant creation of a general 'culture of fear', in which one all too easily disavows one's own violence. Don't 'we', thus viewed, once again abandon ourselves to illusions of victory, and fancy its surrogates? The case of the so-called 'escalation dominance', a concept taken to guarantee the permanent possibility 'to win a war at any level of violence', as we find it expressed in the US nuclear strategy, exemplarily pinpoints this tendency. Yet it also is necessary to ask bluntly: is there any military strategy that would do without some conception of how war – whether in its 'old' or 'new' forms – can be won?¹³ To want to win

¹³ The debate whether or not the so-called 'new wars' are really *new*, is notorious. As expressed here, we wonder, however, if it is not rather to be understood as a substitute debate that results in eclipsing the really important questions with which the 'phenomenon of war' confronts us.

war, consequently, implies the hope to perch on victory – without things being clear, however, in regard to who or what (and for how long, etc.) the losers of a war are deemed to be defeated. Will, e.g., the 'Islamic State' be defeated if it is cast out of its last hideaways in Northern Syria, once it will no longer offer any noteworthy resistance? Given the globalization of the war of/on terror, no scholar who understands the history of war would seriously vouch for that. And does not such an insight also prove that there are definite borders to our habits of imagining *vincibility* (*Besiegbarkeit*)? Doesn't the use of 'warlike violence' nurture tenacious illusions concerning the vincibility of one's enemies – illusions that, for their part, may lead to the use of further violence?¹⁴

(9) Yet how should it be possible to waive our illusory phantasies of possible victory? Wouldn't that call upon us to at least accept the very existence of enemies, and to not give in to the wish to extinguish them in order to once and for all be free from the conflicts such plights create? This, however, raises the question as to what forms of commerce with enemies are imaginable, provided that they are to stay alive: is it only about a kind of 'sparing subjection' or rather about 'rendering them innocuous' by way of internment? Or is it something else, something yet to be fathomed in our late modern social technologies?

However this may be, reasons for future enmity will always be present – whether due to reasons such as the unjust (global) distribution of goods, disavowed forms of collective discrimination, ecological disparities (especially in the case of water supplies), or the demagogic agitation that entails an unquenchable quest for new scapegoats (both within and without). Yet the mere existence of collective fault lines of enmity does not automatically, at least without a little further help, create 'warlike violence'. Undoubtedly, this also requires the silent functioning of effective illusions, most notably the aforementioned illusion that certain enemies can certainly be defeated – and, ideally, in a way that will render any future war unnecessary. In this sense, indeed every war waged for the sake of being victorious envisages a kind of 'final solution', albeit often without conscious awareness.

¹⁴ For the historian of ideas it might be interesting to mention that this whole dilemma was articulated most clearly by Arendt who, in *The human condition*, critically exposed the original sin of political theory, that is, the "conflation of freedom and sovereignty." How this conflation resulted in a variety of illusions of autonomy and related imaginations of an autonomous, masterful and invulnerable body that always is complicit in creating violence, is something that is discussed today on many fronts at the intersections of contemporary critical thought, most notably between feminist theory, political phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. Topically the works of Debra Bergoffen, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, and Jacob Rogozinski, to mention just a few, are exemplary of this tendency.

Regarded from the viewpoint of contemporary military strategies, we are confronted with the insight that no final victory can be achieved, even if such strategies deploy every available means within their power. Yet even this truly problematic outlook on victories that are ruinous and therefore prove practically impossible, does not, as experience tells, seem potent enough to forbid all flirting with 'final solutions'. Enemies apparently do not offer us any other alternative than to destructively defeat and annihilate them.

Notwithstanding the impossibility of a *final* victory, the enemies of enemies yet seem to be without alternative and thus quite reasonably strive for such a defeat. Is it possible, and if so, how could one attempt to change anything about this dilemma? Could it be that even here strategies of disillusionment might prove helpful? Or is it illusory by definition to even attempt to undermine the phantasms of victory at the very point where they appear as a reasonable response to inimical threats?¹⁵

When the historian Koselleck wrote that the future to come may spare us victories, he apparently had this kind of fatalistic, polemological dynamics in mind that we have been talking about: a dynamic that is war prone by way of making one believe that one is capable to 'finally' 'disarm' or, if necessary, to 'eliminate' one's respective enemies. However, a victory over the *pólemos* as such, something deemed possible by some, will never be achieved, unless one dispense of the idea that we can dispose of one's enemies once and for all.

Finally, all this results in a challenge to the question of the *political as such*: are we able to imagine a concept of the political without the idea of some final victory and the destructive action this necessarily seems to entail, even when one is confronted by radical enemies?

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¹⁵ About the becoming systemic of such threats see A. Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, Paris: La découverte 2016.