

Book review

War and Its Other

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Nick Mansfield

Theorizing War: From Hobbes to Badiou

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In this ambitious, erudite and at the same time impassioned book on conceptualisations of war since the seventeenth century, Nick Mansfield starts from the premise that war can only be thought in relation to its other. This other can assume different guises, such as peace, the social, sovereignty and so on. Mansfield persuasively argues that only a 'humanist sentimentality' would see war's other as unquestionably good. (165) Such naivete forgets that wars have always been fought and crimes have always been perpetrated in the name of a purported defence of humanity, even of life itself. 'Peace might be the most aggressive thing of all.' (114) Consequently:

If the key function of the concept of war has been—since Hobbes—to discipline social life, then we cannot take refuge in the strong opposition between war and peace. If the main function of the concept of war is to rule peace, then peace itself is a concept we must do without. The nature of sociality itself must be rethought. (100)

Mansfield defends this *anti*-humanist position without, however, a detailed account of a rethinking of the social, even though such an account is implicit.

The book is organised as an interrogation of the opposition between war and its other. Mansfield identifies three attitudes towards such an opposition. The first two are examined in Part I. The first, developed by Hobbes in the wake of the Westphalian legitimation of state power, asserts a strong opposition between war and its other. Through a close reading of parts of the *Leviathan*, Mansfield shows that, despite initial impressions, the state is not the renunciation of individual rights so that the sovereign can guarantee peace. Instead, Hobbes holds that a state of war against all characterises equally the state of nature and the commonwealth. The difference between the two consists in how this war leads to its aim. 'There can be no secure property in the state of nature' and hence the motive for war, individual desire, can never be realised. (16) Conversely, the 'commonwealth is the successful version of war' in that it can regulate and thus fulfil desire. (16) But this introduces a complex relation: 'Civil society, and indeed sovereign authority itself, do war's work, while attempting to quell it'. (19) In other words, whereas society is presented as the overcoming of the war-ridden state of nature, in matter of fact society includes within itself the war-impulse in order to control and curtail it. Mansfield shows that a similar structure of excluding war in order to re-incorporate it later characterises Kant's essay on 'Perpetual Peace'.

The second attitude towards the opposition between war and its other is to repudiate the opposition completely. The paradigmatic figure here is the soldier and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose famous statement—'war is a mere continuation of policy by other means'—neatly summarises this position. As Mansfield shows, this position conceptualises war as activating the social. This requires, however, an account of agency. Such an account is provided through a distinction between two types of war, one that is the passionate and irrational war of hatred and the other that is the calculative and instrumental war for the furthering of state or national interests. These two wars, however, are impossible to separate completely, and their mixed motives directly threaten the social fabric. At this point, the agency of the genius is needed in order to harness these contradictory energies and direct them towards a social fulfilment. 'As the co-ordination of elite political intention and mass interest through the figure of the genius, war is society

in action. Yet, the instability of the relationships here installs some volatility and tension at the heart of war'. (38) In other words, the very tension between the irrational and rational war persists as an inherent threat and destabilising force to the actions of the genius.

The third attitude towards the complex of war and its other is analysed in Part II of *Theorizing War*, taking up roughly half the monograph. The author sides with this position. It is characterised by the productive potential of the relation between the war and its other:

War and its other contradict but also *produce* one another, but not simply by negatively determining one another. They produce one another in endless acts of mutual collaboration in which they remain hostile and threatening to one another ... war and its other cannot simply be seen as either opposite to or continuous with one another. Instead, they incite, even require, one another, while remaining threatening to one another. (39–40, emphasis added)

The relation between war and its other is productive, but not in terms of a determinate negation. Mansfield is careful to eschew a simple dialectical relation between the two that would have required a higher term for their resolution. Instead, it is the tension itself that persists. The resolution of the enigma of the relation between war and its other is never forthcoming, it is always held in abeyance.

Mansfield skilfully navigates a wide field in order to show the operation of this complex between war and its other. For instance, he shows the complex presence of war as the economic structure of the psyche in Freud, whereby Eros and Thanatos are involved in a complex relation that both generates and curtails aggression. This economic relation is further elaborated through a discussion of Bataille's notion of excess in *The Accursed Share* as well as in his *Theory of Religion*. Mansfield locates the culmination of this economic, non-dialectical model in Deleuze and Guattari's war-machine, concentrating on a reading of the chapter on nomadism in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Part II of *Theorizing War* concludes with a discussion of Levinas and Derrida. According to Levinas, 'war is the trace of peace' (105) and according to Derrida, 'without war, society does not exist'. (117) Mansfield brilliantly argues that these should not be taken as evidence of a polemophile

impulse. On the contrary, both Levinas and Derrida argue that there is something more primary than the opposition between war and its other, without, however, it being outside this opposition. It is rather produced by it as well as producing it. In Levinasian terms, infinity underlies every totality.

Perhaps Part III is the most original section of the monograph. Mansfield engages there with the commonly expressed assertion that we live in an age of global or perpetual war. Clausewitz is identified as the origin of this statement and Mansfield shows that most theorists who espouse this position do indeed acknowledge their debt. Further, Mansfield shows that this identification of war with the social starts to become a prevalent position with Foucault's lectures *Society Must be Defended*, which led to the development of the idea of biopolitics.¹ According to Foucault, power is no longer articulated as a drive to legitimacy, nor as a way of disciplining the individual. Instead, power is articulated as the control of populations. In his lectures, Foucault explains the articulation of this power as a form of institutionalised racism. 'Society makes itself in its wars' in the sense that 'the social, war's reputed other, merely becomes the means by which the hidden war plays out its relations of domination and subordination'. (129) The culmination of the identification of war with society can be found in Virilio. Mansfield also includes here the work of Bauman, Baudrillard, as well as Hardt and Negri. Besides the particular complexity of each thinker—complexities respected in Mansfield's close readings—the overarching argument against their position is that they always presuppose that a distinction between war and its other, especially the social, is possible. It is that distinction, they argue, that is lost in the present, postmodern society and which somehow needs to be recuperated. In other words, all these positions do not account for the complexity of the relation between war and its other that Mansfield had argued for in Part II.

According to Mansfield, the current political exigency consists in being attuned to the impossibility of either completely separating war from its other, or of collapsing them into each other as if a clear distinction between the two is possible. From this perspective, war is a 'self-generating activity' (153), in the sense that it produces peace, economic prosperity, social welfare and so on as the means of its self-perpetuation. In other words, Mansfield suggests—although he does not phrase it this way—that war can be seen as sovereign in Bataille's sense where the

sovereign is nothing, lacking both legitimation and an identifiable aim other than its own promulgation. This produces profit for some, political power for others, and devastation for most of those caught in its cycle. Moreover, a glance at today's geopolitics, characterised by a so-called 'war on terror' that led to the invasion of sovereign states, as well as the domestic politics of social democracies with their wars on drugs, smoking, obesity and so on, makes it appear convincing that the entanglement of war and its other 'is not merely theoretical' (154) but a practical concern too. Mansfield's intervention in this situation consists of a plea to recognise the pragmatic significance of this theoretical complex:

given the unpredictability of our political future and the superannuation of the political models we have inherited, a theoretical construct like the war/other complex may provide one way in which future situations may be thought not ideologically but pragmatically. (167)

One of the key terms in such a pragmatic grasp of the complex is to realise the pivotal role of human rights. Human rights will become a productive site to negotiate responsibly the complex relation between war and its other only if it is recognised that their 'universality' was the result of specific historical circumstances and their defence can potentially give rise to further conflict. This aporia is irresolvable because there is 'no outside the relationship between human rights and power, because there is no war simply and resolutely separated from its other'. (168)

Mansfield's book is an impressive and ambitious attempt to organise the various ways that war has been theorised since the seventeenth century. There is no doubt that intellectuals writing on the complex economy of war in its relation to peace, sociality and the state will have to contend with Mansfield's account. And yet, at the same time, there is a curious omission in this account, namely, civil war. Civil war is mentioned in the book (for example, 110, 126 and 148), but its relation to the complex between war and its other is never thematised. This is curious, given that at least since Plato distinguished between war and civil war (*Republic*, 470b), completely excluding the latter from the political, civil war has functioned as the other not only of war itself, but also of war's various others, such as the social. Thus, civil war offers both a threat to locating something outside the complex of war and its other, as well as the possibility to indicate that such an outside does not exist. In

other words, traditionally civil war has functioned as something separate from war and its other. As a consequence, it may have the capacity to delineate war's relation to its other. But, then, a host of questions arise, such as: Is civil war the presupposition that underlies the relation between war and its other? Can civil war function as an outside in Blanchot's sense, or as a threshold or limit condition that sustains, as well as is sustained by war and its other? And how would that inflect a notion of human rights?

Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of Mansfield's remarkable book is that it allows for the raising of such questions that interrogate the complex of war's differential relations. This monograph, then, is a theoretical achievement whose practical consequences have already started unfolding.

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¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey, Picador, New York, 2003.