



Philosophy and Methodology in Clausewitz's Work

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Abstract

In Clausewitz's own view his work is akin to a philosophical structure of the art of war. This philosophical structure is most visible in his elaborations concerning the relation between theory and praxis—elaborations which make his work a treatise of practical philosophy. According to him, theory has to: (1) reveal the nature or essence of war; (2) reflect the difference between theory and practice; (3) provide recommendations for military action in war; (4) educate and cultivate the mind of the political and military leaders as well as that of the army; (5) follow the footsteps of Kantian critique. Last but not least, this article also offers an account of Clausewitz's novel position regarding the dialectical thinking of its time.

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In Clausewitz's own view his work is akin to a philosophical structure of the art of war. This philosophical structure is most visible in his elaborations concerning the relation between theory and praxis—elaborations which make his work a treatise of practical philosophy. According to him, theory has to: (1) reveal the nature or essence of war; (2) reflect the difference between theory and practice; (3) provide recommendations for military action in war; (4) educate and cultivate the mind of the political and military leaders as well as that of the army; (5) follow the footsteps of Kantian critique. Last but not least, this article also offers an account of Clausewitz's novel position regarding the dialectical thinking of its time.

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I. Clausewitz and the Philosophy of his Time

The eminent Clausewitz researcher Hans Rothfels made the following remark concerning Clausewitz's method: "And if we are ever to succeed in creating a political theory worthy of the name, this will only be possible in a similar way, by means of an equally harmonious combination of conflicting propositions."¹ Clausewitz was aware that the conceptualization of war in terms of antitheses was problematic, and he made a number of attempts to solve this problem. Evidence of this can be found in his statement that he intended to write a separate chapter on the principle of polarity.² He was never able to do this, as was the case with so many of the plans he had at the time of his death. But in an article written shortly before he died, Clausewitz says that the "whole of physical and intellectual nature" is kept in balance by means of antitheses.³ When he deals with the relationship between attack and defense, Clausewitz even speaks of the "true logical antithesis" between them, which is of greater significance than a simple logical contradiction.⁴

¹ Hans Rothfels, Carl von Clausewitz, *Politik und Krieg* (Bonn: Nachdruck, 1980).

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 83.

³ See Karl Schwartz, *Leben des Generals Carl von Clausewitz* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1878).

⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 523. See also Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle. The political theory of war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Raymond Aron and Peter Paret, the authors of some of the most important studies of Clausewitz published to date, have both emphasized his dialectical method. Aron assumes that Clausewitz would have disclosed the secret of his method in the chapter he intended to write about polarity. He draws attention in particular to the fact that none of the commentators on Clausewitz has so far undertaken any further investigation of the significance of this remark. The planned chapter on polarity would, says Aron, have covered the different kinds of antitheses, which is to say that it would have dealt with the particular features of Clausewitz's method. Aron assumes that in this chapter, Clausewitz would have revealed the secret of his dialectics.⁵ It is this question, the secret of Clausewitz's dialectics that I now wish to look at more closely.

Aron argues that the narrow concept of polarity could not become a fundamental concept for Clausewitz because it is tied to the idea of a zero-sum game. As Clausewitz puts it, the principle of polarity is only valid in cases where "positive and negative interests exactly cancel one another out." In a battle, both sides are trying to win; only this is "true polarity," since if one wins the other must lose.⁶ Aron distinguishes between the zero-sum game of the duel and the diverse forms of antithesis which are typical of the pairs of concepts Clausewitz uses. In these antitheses, each concept can be seen as a pole: theory and practice, the scale of success and the risk taken, attack and defense. Aron concludes that if one wanted to identify a fundamental concept in Clausewitz, it would be that of the antithesis.⁷

Peter Paret argues that Clausewitz's general approach is dialectical in character. This was, he says, something shared by Clausewitz's generation, all of whom thought in terms such as contradiction, polarity, the separation and connection of the active and passive, the positive and the negative. The principle of polarity seemed to be the only thing that could overcome the infinite distance between the positive and the negative. Clausewitz's treatments of polarity and of the relationship between attack and defense were, according to Paret, variations on a theme that was very popular at the time.⁸

What was the significance of the concept of polarity in Clausewitz's time? It was a fundamental principle of Goethe's understanding of nature that a force could be divided into polar opposites, but that these would then reunite. Goethe wrote in 1828 that the concepts of polarity and enhancement were the two great wheels driving the whole of nature. Clausewitz's remarks at the beginning of his first chapter are in accordance with this methodological principle: he infers the natural intensification of force from the three interactions to the extreme, from the polarity of the duel.⁹ Hegel stressed that the contemporary discovery of polarity had been of "outstanding significance."¹⁰ Clausewitz and Hegel lived at the same time in Berlin and their private residences were separated by only a few streets. Aron denied Hegel's influence on Clausewitz, but his analysis is based on a faulty comparison. He compared the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1806 with the work of Clausewitz after 1827. In other words, he compared the Hegelian struggle for recognition in 1806 with the instrumental conception in Clausewitz's mature works — a conception that is based on the idea of mutual recognition. But if we compare the early Hegel of 1806 with the positions of the early Clausewitz (1806-1812), then these turn out to be quite similar. The

⁵ Raymond Aron, *Den Krieg denken* (Frankfurt: Propylaen, 1980), 623.

⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 83.

⁷ Aron, *Den Krieg denken*, 623.

⁸ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz und der Staat* (Bonn: Dümmler, 1993), 187.

⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 75-77.

¹⁰ See Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich," *Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preußischen Geschichte* 10/1 (2000): 49-84.

same is true if we compare the instrumental view of war developed by Clausewitz after 1827 with Hegel's *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (1827).¹¹

During this period, a time of fundamental changes in the circumstances of life, ideas, habits of thought, and political conditions, the question of whether an antithesis should be thought of as a unity, or if it was only possible to emphasize the contrast between old and new, was an issue of paramount importance. In 1811, Rahel Levin (who after her marriage, became famous in European salons as Rahel Varnhagen) described this problem in the following terms: "In this new world that has been broken into pieces, the only thing left to a man who wishes to understand ... is the heroism of scholarship."¹² This statement is as true for today as it was in Clausewitz's time.

There are different aspects of polarity, which need to be distinguished from one another. The philosopher Schelling, for example, stressed the idea that behind what appeared to be contrasts there was a hidden identity that must be sought, and understood polarity as a law of the world: It is a priori certain that ... real principles opposed to one another are at work throughout the whole of nature. If these opposing principles are united in one body, they give that body polarity, according to Schelling. Goethe, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the idea that there was a vital tension between the opposites: The life of nature divides what is unified and unites what is divided.¹³

The most important influences on Clausewitz were the rationalist currents of the Enlightenment, Idealism, Romanticism, and the findings of the natural sciences. It was from Kiesewetter, a follower of Kant that Clausewitz learned about rationalism at an early age. During Clausewitz's time in Berlin, the idealism of Fichte and Hegel was the dominant current of thought in intellectual circles. Clausewitz also spent a number of weeks in 1829 reading the Goethe-Schiller correspondence. He also attended the lectures of the romantic philosopher Heinrich Steffens during the winter of 1824-25, and those of the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, which were the start of a new flowering of the natural sciences in Germany, in 1827.¹⁴

Clausewitz took up aspects of all these tendencies within the thought of his contemporaries and used them in his theory of war, to the extent that they helped him to reflect on his own experiences of war. One can say that Clausewitz's own position floats within the field formed by these four currents of thought. Each of them provided him with stimulation, but his own position cannot be traced back to any single one of them. By floating in this way, Clausewitz was able to develop a position of his own which is more than a mere variation on the theme of the significance of antitheses and their unity, which was so widely discussed at the time.

Clausewitz formulated the problem of contrasts for the theory of war and the art of warfare, as follows: The essential difference is that war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts, or at matter, which is animate but passive and yielding, as is the case with the human mind in the fine arts. In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts.¹⁵ What Clausewitz has in mind is not only a reaction, but a counter-reaction, in which the will and the actions of the attacker are annihilated by those of the defender. Adding the difference between symmetrical (both sides are imitating

¹¹ See *ibid.*; Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle. The political theory of war.*

¹² Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz und der Staat*, 14. See also Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich."

¹³ *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 4 (Basel: I-K, 1976), 934.

¹⁴ For all these references, see Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich."

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 149.

each other in their interaction¹⁶) and asymmetrical counter-action (defense as the stronger form of war¹⁷), Clausewitz directly used the philosophy of the time as a means to integrate his war experiences into his theory.

Clausewitz does not explicitly formulate the distinction between action and counteraction, but he implicitly uses it as a basis for the development of his theoretical approach. The fundamental importance of this distinction is apparent from the beginning of chapter one. The initial definition assumes a sovereign and independent subject who imposes his will on the enemy through the use of force. In interactions, however, the will is not considered sovereign at all. "Thus I am not in control: he [the enemy] dictates to me as much as I dictate to him," Clausewitz emphasizes.¹⁸ This restriction of the sovereign will comes about in two steps. The first of these corresponds to Clausewitz's statement that interactions mean that no-one is "in control," that is, no-one is autonomous. Each party dictates its law to the other, and neither can escape. In Chapter 2, Clausewitz expresses this thought even more clearly: "If he [the enemy] were to seek the decision through a major battle, *his choice would force us against our will to do likewise.*"¹⁹ In the initial definition, Clausewitz defines war by saying that it is a matter of compelling the enemy to do one's will. In Chapter 2, however, he states that even actions opposed to one's own might be necessary in war.

For Clausewitz, "action" is determined by the autonomy and responsibility of one's own will. Counteraction is a response to an assumed or actual action on the part of another person and exists "against our will" only because of that action. Any action in a human context is determined by those two dimensions, namely, on the one hand, the autonomy and responsibility of the will, which cannot be renounced, and, on the other hand, the "interaction" of various counteractions, which function according to their own logic, and which are in reciprocal relation with each other. In war, it is impossible to separate these two types of action, and this distinction is therefore not a question of separated forms of action. It expresses different dimensions or "tendencies," as Clausewitz puts it, of the same context of action.

Clausewitz begins *On War* by saying that war is nothing more than a duel. Although he then differentiates this original concept by introducing the idea of a "duel on a larger scale" and the three-part definition, what he is doing here is stressing the symmetrical relationship between opponents. This assumption of symmetry in the concept of the duel has far-reaching consequences. Clausewitz's argument here reflects the political theory of the 18th century, according to which every state had the right to wage war. This concept differed from the medieval idea of 'just war' by assuming that the right to wage war was an aspect of every state's sovereignty. This symmetry brings with it a tendency to justify wars, but it has other consequences as well. It includes a recognition in principle that one's opponent is *justus hostis*, an equal, so the enemy is no longer considered a criminal. This assumption that enemies in war are equal is the basic precondition of respect for the laws of war.²⁰

Clausewitz conceptualises war quite differently in the context of his concept of defense. He argues that when we consider war *philosophically*, we see that it begins with defence. "Essentially, the concept of war does not originate with the attack," he says, and notes that it

¹⁶ See the concept of mimetic rivalry in René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Ernst Vollrath, "Neue Wege der Klugheit. Zum methodischen Prinzip der Theorie des Handelns bei Clausewitz," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 31/1(1984).

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

originates with defense rather than attack.²¹ The immediate purpose of defense is fighting, because defending oneself and fighting are obviously the same thing. Defense is a matter of fighting off an attack, so it presupposes this attack. Attack, on the other hand, is directed towards the occupation of territory, which is its “positive purpose.” By saying this, Clausewitz introduces a decisive qualification into his account of the symmetry and polarity of the duel. Contrary to his initial definition of war as an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will, Clausewitz now makes it clear that, if we consider war philosophically, it begins with defence. Clausewitz translates the whole phenomenon of forcing the enemy to do our will into the antithetical principles of attack and defence.

II. Clausewitz's Understanding of the Tasks of Theory

In order to shed more light on Clausewitz as a practical philosopher we can use Clausewitz's explanations concerning the relation of theory and praxis. Clausewitz did not provide a definition of theory but sought to determine the tasks and functions which a theory should serve. He argues, for example, as mentioned above, that such a conflict of living forces as can be witnessed in war, remains bound to general rules (or laws). His task would be to examine whether these rules and laws might provide useful guidance for action. He also believed it should be clear, that this subject like all others that do not transcend our comprehension can be illuminated by the search of a mindful intellect and made clear in its inherent logic and argument.²² Based on this short description, it becomes obvious that Clausewitz's concept of theory must be understood as the attempt to find general rules or laws of war despite its ever changing character, which should additionally provide useful guidance for political and military action. He refers to the attempt to reveal the “logic” *inherent* in war, although he also denies that war merely has a logic of its own. In another part of his masterpiece, he demands that theory has to judge each war in the first place with regard to the character and general outlines given by the probability of the scale of measurement of the influence of policy.²³ We could cite many more statements by Clausewitz, but based on *On War* as a whole, I will propose five different conceptualizations of how practical philosophy (that is, simply put, the relations between theory and praxis) should be understood in the work of Clausewitz.

A. *The Nature of War*

Clausewitz uses the concept of theory in connection with the attempt to identify the nature or the essence of war. This understanding of theory can be seen in his famous first chapter, where he characterizes war as a duel (in German Clausewitz uses the term *Zweikampf*, which is not totally the same as a duel), and in his “formula.” But his idea of a theory emerges most clearly in his “result for theory” at the end of chapter one, where he discusses the wondrous trinity, which should not be identified with “Trinitarian warfare.”²⁴ Additionally, we find in the first chapter the term of “absolute war” (understood as the concept of war) which he also uses in book eight where he states that theory has the obligation to put emphasis on this absolute form of war as a guideline for action in general.²⁵ Some Clausewitz scholars have compared this conception of theory with Max Weber's concept of the “ideal type.”²⁶

²¹ Ibid., 377. in the German original, Clausewitz uses the term “philosophisch denken.” See Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Dümmler, 1991), 644.

²² Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 303-304.

²³ Ibid., 959.

²⁴ See Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle*.

²⁵ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 959.

²⁶ See, for instance, Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002).

B. The Difference between Theory and Praxis

At first sight, there seems to be a similar understanding of theory in chapter one with regard to the interactions to the extreme, which he labels as the concept of war.²⁷ But contrary to the understanding (discussed above) of theory as a guideline for action, Clausewitz now wants to emphasize the great difference between theory and praxis, seeing theory as nothing else than a law derived from books, as a mere abstraction.²⁸

In the former case Clausewitz uses the theory of war in order to ensure that action is guided by the principles of his theoretical construction. Exactly the opposite applies in the latter case. Here Clausewitz emphasizes the great difference, sometimes even the chasm, which separates theory in its abstract form and war in reality. The second variant of theory can be found in those parts of *On War* where the “absolute of war” is labeled as nothing else than a mere abstraction, which Clausewitz contrasts with the concepts of probability and contingency, the frictions in real war. Although I find his interpretation of Clausewitz the most sophisticated one to date, I disagree with Raymond Aron²⁹ concerning the understanding of theory as an “unreal” concept of war. It would be a problematic understanding of Clausewitz if we were to say that his theory of what war is had nothing to do with what he thought war is really like.

Two different attempts at solving the problem of the absolute concept of war have been pursued in the history of Clausewitz studies. One of these historical lines of interpretation argues that the tendency to the absolute is caused by the context of warfare, the political and societal conditions or policies that lead to total warfare. These scholars invoke Clausewitz’s view of war as a continuation of policy and argue that it is a political decision or dependent on the political circumstances whether a war has the tendency to limited or total warfare. John Keegan maintains that this tendency to total war depending on the societal conditions has been a historical force in the development of warfare ever since the French Revolution.³⁰ This interpretation implies that the tendency to an absolute, total form of warfare is not inherent in the logic of warfare itself, but arises from the political antagonism of the parties concerned.

The second line of interpretation acknowledges that for Clausewitz war is an instrument of policy, but maintains that due to the violent form of this particular means and the unforeseeable inherent logic of war as a struggle between action and counter-action, war is also characterized by an immanent tendency to escalation, which cannot always be controlled by policy. This is, in essence, Aron’s interpretation which argues that policy has the task to limit the tendency of escalation inherent in war.³¹ In my view, the tension in Clausewitz’s theory between the escalating tendencies within war and those outside of war, cannot be resolved. There are passages in *On War*, even in the final version of the first chapter, in which Clausewitz seems to argue in favor of one of these interpretations, but there are others where he argues the opposite.

Although Clausewitz explicitly rejected the idea that war has an inherent logic, he averred nevertheless that war has its own grammar³² — and I think that this inherent grammar of war might even have become the logic of some wars in history. An example of this tendency might be World War I, whereas the previous strand of interpretation would apply to World War II: the totalitarian politics of the German Reich did in fact lead to total warfare of

²⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 76-77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77ff.

²⁹ Aron, *Den Krieg denken*.

³⁰ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1993).

³¹ Aron, *Den Krieg denken*.

³² Clausewitz, *On War*, 605.

annihilation and to the counter-action of the Western allies to fight for unconditional and therefore total surrender of the German Nazi Reich. In contrast, in 1914 no one wanted a world war, but military strategies became independent from any meaningful political purpose.³³ It seems to me that the three escalatory tendencies (Clausewitz's three interactions to the extreme) are not exclusively determined either by military or political factors and it is certainly possible to think of politicians who partake in the escalatory game as much as their generals do. Perhaps one could suggest that the *logic of escalation* has different *grammars*, i.e., different levels, including a political and a military level.

It has to be acknowledged that Clausewitz mentioned the concept of grammar only once in *On War*. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize the significance of this reference, because he is using it in order to describe the relation of policy/politics and war. A great deal of the whole of philosophy since Kant could be characterized as an attempt to replace the logic embodied in natural law with the grammar of speech and language, or more generally, the technique of action and speech, the rules of the game as a closed system. The famous "linguistic turn" of the twentieth century in general can be characterized by the replacement of what is judged as good and just by an appropriate, just method, the substitution of substance or essence by grammar, semantics by syntax, and finally meaning through discourse in both Foucault and Habermas.³⁴

It was Wilhelm von Humboldt, a close friend of Clausewitz, who — in my opinion in a direct, but hidden, quarrel with Hegel — established the primacy of grammar over content.³⁵ With respect to the linguistic turn, outlined by Wilhelm von Humboldt, one solution of the relation of war and policy/politics would be to say that it is neither a relation of logic and grammar but neither of a different logic, but one in which there is a grammar of war and a grammar of policy, both of which are bound to societal developments (this was the solution of Marx, Engels and Lenin). This is also the solution of Foucault, who replaces the content of policy by techniques of political action and power. Foucault tries to reverse Clausewitz's formula by arguing, that policy/politics is the continuation of war by other means (see Treiber in this issue). Although my critique of Foucault was excessive in my *Das Rätsel Clausewitz*, I am still of the opinion that Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz could be meaningful only for some historical tendencies, not in general. Foucault's lectures in 1977, where he developed that reversal of Clausewitz, showed the problematic consequences of his approach. If power is everything and everywhere, there is only one possibility to escape this ubiquitous power: pure resistance for the sake of resistance. Perhaps Foucault did not realize that the counter-movements of modernity are the product of modernity itself.³⁶

C. Recommendations for Praxis

A third function of theory as practical philosophy is related to strategy and war plans, that is, to how war should be fought in order to achieve intended purpose and goals. Here Clausewitz is speaking of the theory of great power wars, and he characterizes this kind of theory as strategy. The theory of war is related to the correct use of those means for the purpose which

³³ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg*, 2nd edition (Frankfurt: Campus, 2017).

³⁴ See Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Key-young Son, *Order wars and floating balance. How the rising powers are reshaping our world view in the twenty-first century* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "Dialectical philosophy after Auschwitz. Remaining Silent, Speaking out, engaging with the victims," *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3/2 (2019): 188-199. DOI:10.22618/TP.PJCV.20204.1.201011.

³⁵ Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich."

³⁶ See Herberg-Rothe and Son, *Order wars and floating balance. How the rising powers are reshaping our world view in the twenty-first century*; Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Das Rätsel Clausewitz* (Munich: Fink, 2001).

war has to serve. He gives an example of this understanding of theory by saying that theory relates to the decisive points in warfare in which one can achieve a preponderance of physical power and advantages.³⁷

As for this tension between strategy and the “terrible friction” of war, Clausewitz gives plenty of advice on how to overcome these difficulties. If he had not been convinced of the possibility of conducting warfare in accordance with a previously formulated war plan, his theory would be a pure abstraction. We know for certain that till the end of his life he outlined numerous war plans against France and Russia. These would have been pointless if he believed that after the first shot in war everything changes to such a degree that every plan drawn in advance would be reviewed useless.³⁸

In fact, Clausewitz emphasized the terrible friction in war in order to find ways to overcome it. For some part of his life, a model for this approach to overcoming friction was for Clausewitz the military genius of Napoleon. Hegel even universalized the genius of Napoleon after the battle of Jena by saying that he witnessed not only Napoleon passing by in the streets of Jena, but also the embodiment of the absolute spirit of world’s history. Sometimes however, this genius of Napoleon came down to a series of fortunate contingencies which worked in his favor. For example, neither Napoleon nor his enemies knew before the battle of Jena and Auerstedt where the other side was to be found. But the difference was that Napoleon always knew where his own army was located — and this knowledge was of paramount importance for his conduct of war.³⁹

Nevertheless, Alan Beyerchen is absolutely right in emphasizing the inevitable difference between war plans and their execution in his epochal article on linear and non-linear theory in Clausewitz’s masterpiece. Terence Holmes appears to make a valid point when he argues in reply to Beyerchen that the concept of friction does not dominate Clausewitz’s thinking on war.⁴⁰ But Beyerchen mainly might underestimate the problematic relation of action and counter-action as the decisive cause of the departure of real war from the original war plan. Clausewitz already observes in chapter one, that in war both sides aim to win, but only one of them will gain victory, while the other of course loses. And the adversary may lose the war not because of friction, but due to our own efforts or vice versa. After all, war is not only subject to the resistance of friction, but also a real fight, a struggle of two adversaries. Consequently, I would propose to supplement Clausewitz’s definition of war at the beginning of chapter one. Whereas he simply states, that war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will, I would add the words: “and not to be compelled to do the will of our enemy.” This interaction of action and counter-action⁴¹ in war directly leads to Clausewitz’s “consequences for theory”, that is, to his concept of the trinity.⁴²

In our own times, we have witnessed a growing number of wars in which neither wins or loses. This phenomenon could be observed in the last wars in Gaza and the Lebanon war of 2006. This development might be related to globalization and the resulting problem that an adversary can no longer be completely crushed down in a way that would result in his total defeat. Such tendencies have already been witnessed in guerrilla and partisan warfare, in which the partisans are winning, if they do not suffer a decisive defeat. Although this proposition

³⁷ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 1047.

³⁸ Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*.

³⁹ See Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz’s puzzle*. I owe this clarification to Jan Willem Honig.

⁴⁰ Terence Holmes, “Planning versus Chaos in Clausewitz’s On War,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/1 (2007) : 129 – 151. See also Holmes’s contribution to this special issue of the *PJCV*.

⁴¹ See Vollrath, “Neue Wege der Klugheit. Zum methodischen Prinzip der Theorie des Handelns bei Clausewitz.”

⁴² Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz’s puzzle*.

does not amount to be a law of war, reflecting only a tendency in partisan warfare, it seems to be increasingly valid. The most important reason for this development is that our adversary does not need to win the war in a military sense. He just has to ensure by all means that his opponent would not be able to win the war. In a globalized world, policy, the media, and the discourse about the legitimacy of applying force are playing an ever more important role for the conduct of war. Some obvious examples at present are Afghanistan and Iraq, but already after the Yom Kippur war in 1973 the Israelis have not won a single war in a classical and traditional manner, but neither have they lost a war.⁴³

D. Theory as a Kind of Praxis Itself

To tackle a further feature of theory with respect to the conduct of war, let us turn to Clausewitz's numerous studies on past wars and military campaigns. These historical examples are not directly a kind of theory, but they are used by Clausewitz in order to develop a theory. Historical experiences are for Clausewitz indirectly a kind of theory for the purpose of education. It is a kind of "intellectualization" of war. Clausewitz here follows in the footsteps of his teacher Scharnhorst at the war academy in Berlin. It was a hallmark of Scharnhorst's pedagogical method to provide students at the institute for young officers with historical examples to be studied in depth, instead of teaching them theories. For Clausewitz, historical examples were a different kind of theory, one which is based in reality instead of abstraction. Clausewitz was fully aware of the "lessons of history," but solely in order to "educate the mind" and not to provide dogmatic advice.⁴⁴

These examples do not yield rules for the commander, they serve rather to educate him by providing experience and knowledge of failures in the past both military and politically. Although policy does not conduct war directly, it must judge the course of action and especially it must estimate what the army can achieve and what it cannot. In this kind of practical philosophy, Clausewitz connects warfare with the historical, societal and political relations of its own historical epoch. Clausewitz emphasized that theory must be an enlightened judgment based on experience and knowledge, but by no means any kind of dogmatic application of rules.⁴⁵ The task of theory, in Clausewitz's approach, is to educate the mind of the military and political leaders, not to provide systems and "positive" doctrines for them.

Perhaps one could relate this understanding of theory to the notion of Antonio Gramsci that theory is a kind of praxis in itself, as well as Foucault's position that knowledge and the ability to construct a discourse is not in opposition to praxis, but a kind of power in itself. It is perhaps Emile Simpson who has transformed this insight of Gramsci and Foucault into the theory of the conduct of war with his notion of a strategic narrative.⁴⁶

E. Theory as Critique (Kant)

Clausewitz finally maintains that the task of theory is to differentiate all those aspects which are tied together in war, but which are incommensurable. With regard to this function of theory, Clausewitz here follows in the footsteps of Kant, who was popularized by Clausewitz's teacher at the war academy, Kiesewetter. Clausewitz uses the concept of theory very often in the sense of a critique, which in Kant's theory has the precise meaning of differentiating the

⁴³ See Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg*.

⁴⁴ Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich."

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 290.

⁴⁶ Emile Simpson, *War from the ground up. Twenty-first century combat as politics* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2012).

components of a concept and laying down its boundary lines. Clausewitz additionally borrows from Kant via Kiesewetter the differentiation of formal and material logic.⁴⁷

In summary, we may conclude that there are five different functions Clausewitz ascribes to theory in relation to praxis:

- (1) Theory has the task of revealing the nature or essence of war (this could be seen as an approach following Plato's concept of idea). Theory also serves the function of comparing different wars with one another, which reveals similarities of a number of wars and leads to the construction of an ideal type, as Max Weber later on understood this kind of theory.
- (2) Additionally, Clausewitz maintains that theory simultaneously has to reflect the difference between theory and practice, which inevitably leads to the question as to how theory and praxis are related to one another, when they are obviously not identical.
- (3) Clausewitz gives numerous recommendations for military action in war, based on his own war experiences, historical analysis and his theoretical approach to war plans. In Book II of *On War*, in which he treats the theory of war separately, he is in fact mainly concerned with the art of warfare, not theory in the overall meaning we have tried to explain. The theory as art of warfare is only one dimension of a theory of war in a wider sense.
- (4) It is the purpose of theory to educate and cultivate the mind of the political and military leaders as well as that of the army. Within this understanding of what theory means, one could say that theory is a kind of praxis itself in the sense in which Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault developed this concept.
- (5) Finally, theory is an instrument for gaining (new) knowledge about its subject by differentiating between those aspects, which were previously lumped together. Its main task is to formulate critique in the sense Kant and Kiesewetter understood that term.

III. The Inevitable Dialectics

In my view, those differentiations in Clausewitz's understanding of theory are simultaneously the basics of every theory in the social sciences. This can be systematically demonstrated by generalizing the conception developed above. Based on the difference and unity of theory and praxis, we just need to elaborate the following approach:

- (1) Every theory needs some kind of explanation about its subject, and what the nature or essence of this subject might be. I would label this as an approach in the footsteps of Plato.
- (2) The next step is to look at the various modalities of the subject, which includes a comparison between the different forms in which the subject occurs in reality. That kind of comparison is found in Aristotle's concept of science.
- (3) Whereas in the first two steps the interactions between theory and praxis are treated in general, in the third one we need to be aware of and reflect on the difference of theory and praxis, but also on practically relevant recommendations based on theory for our praxis and performance.
- (4) In the fourth step we will recognize nevertheless that any kind of theory is a kind of praxis in itself. The foundations of such an approach can be detected in Karl Marx's theses on Feuerbach and was subsequently developed by Antonio Gramsci's emphasis on theory as praxis and Michel Foucault's conceptualization of knowledge and theory as a particular form of power.

⁴⁷ See Antulio Echevarria, *Clausewitz and contemporary war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

- (5) After we have arrived at this stage, we must demarcate the boundaries of our theory and relate it to other theories in the social sciences.

The question remains as to how we could design a theory of an ever-changing subject, something chameleon-like, as Clausewitz describes war. In addition, how can we design a theory, which is related to action and counteraction, symmetrical and asymmetrical counteraction? Clausewitz defines symmetrical counteraction as one in which both parties of the conflict are doing and intending the same (this approach is highlighted by René Girard), whereas asymmetrical counteraction is the attempt to eradicate the intentions and actions of the adversary, not by doing the same, but, by doing something different, for example by waiting. Clausewitz explains these different dimensions of counteraction in his lengthy treatment of the varieties of defense. In fact, Clausewitz reveals his method immanently in his dialectically structured treatment of defense and offense, which prepares the ground for a new kind of dialectics, a mediation of Kant and Hegel.⁴⁸

Clausewitz gave a clear indication of his final answer to all of these problems in his result for theory, the wondrous trinity, and his notion that theory has the task to maintain a floating balance between the three tendencies of the wondrous trinity. His untimely death prevented Clausewitz from developing a full-scale theory of war based on the wondrous trinity as a starting point.

Clausewitz's fundamental view of theory is encapsulated in his remark that our "task therefore is to develop a theory that maintain a balance between these three tendencies like an object suspended between three magnets."⁴⁹ Contrary to Beyerchen⁵⁰ I interpret the "wondrous trinity" not within the framework of the relation between theory and friction, but within that of symmetrical and asymmetrical action and counteraction.⁵¹ Friction is important in warfare, but the unfolding of action and counteraction is more decisive. War does not end until the defeated side gives up its resistance. This kind of interaction of opposites could be represented by a three-dimensional sinus curve on an enhancing x-axis or by an increasing wave.

By developing a floating balance in between rationalism (Kant, Kiesewetter and the enlightenment) and romanticism (Goethe and Steffens) as well as between idealism (Clausewitz was influenced by Fichte and Hegel⁵²) and naturalism (Alexander von Humboldt) and also by Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of grammar, Clausewitz emerges not only as a theoretician of war, but even more as the exponent of a new understanding of dialectics. Although being mainly a practical philosophy, his thinking possibly surpasses that of Kant and Hegel with respect to the foundation of such a dialectics though not with respect to its elaboration which we need to develop further by ourselves.⁵³

⁴⁸ For such an approach, see Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle, Lyotard und Hegel* (Vienna: Passagen 2005); Herberg-Rothe and Son, *Order wars and floating balance. How the rising powers are reshaping our world view in the twenty-first century.*

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

⁵⁰ Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17/3 (1992): 59-84.

⁵¹ See Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's puzzle.*

⁵² Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz und Hegel. Ein heuristischer Vergleich."

⁵³ Herberg-Rothe and Son, *Order wars and floating balance.*

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