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Terence M. Holmes

College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, United Kingdom

Abstract

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By contrast with the Holy Trinity, Clausewitz's "strange trinity" is an unstable system, whose three "dominant tendencies" compete for mastery over the realm of war. One tendency is the subordination of war to the aims of policy, but that is constantly challenged by the other two—blind hatred and the enjoyment of adventure. The political tendency is the only one that treats war as the function of a purpose beyond war, but only intermittently does that tendency predominate, meaning that war is more often than not a dysfunctional undertaking and always a highly dubious instrument of policy.

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I. A "Trinity," but Not as We Know it

Clausewitz concludes the first chapter of his treatise *Vom Kriege* with the image of war as a "*wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*."¹ There is no problem with translating the word "*Dreifaltigkeit*," which means "trinity" and is normally used with reference to the Holy Trinity of Christian belief. The epithet "*wunderlich*" is often translated in ways reflecting that religious association. Antulio Echevarria and Andreas Herberg-Rothe speak of the "wondrous trinity,"² while Jan Willem Honig calls it "miraculous."³ Hew Strachan considers that in view of its "mystical connotations" it could be rendered "as 'wondrous' or even 'miraculous.'"⁴ The Howard-Paret translation of *On War* uses the secular expression "remarkable trinity" (89),⁵ altered in the second edition to "paradoxical." But more recently, Michael Howard thought that Clausewitz

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlag, 1966), 111. Unless mentioned otherwise, quotes are not emphasized in the original German edition.

² Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69; Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz's 'Wondrous Trinity' as a Coordinate System of War and Violent Conflict," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3 (2009).

³ Jan Willem Honig, "Clausewitz's *On War*: Problems of Text and Translation," in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.

⁴ Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 178.

⁵ Page numbers given in my text refer to Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). Section numbers refer to the sections of Book I, Chapter One of *On War*.

really meant to evoke the sacred aura of the concept, and that “neither ‘remarkable’ nor ‘paradoxical’ carry the full weight of the original.” He said that if he were to undertake the translation once again, he might now settle for “amazing.”⁶

But by Clausewitz’s time the German expression *wunderlich* was no longer synonymous with *wunderbar*, meaning wonderful or marvellous: rather, it now conveyed the idea of something being strange, odd-looking, or alien. It now belonged in the same family of concepts as *seltzam*, *sonderbar* and *befremdend*.⁷ Raymond Aron is correct when he understands it as an “*étrange trinité*”—though he does not go on to consider what that designation might imply.⁸ I will argue that Clausewitz’s trinity is *strange* in that it is quite unlike the Holy Trinity, the one with which we are *familiar*.

Let us specify the respects in which the Clausewitzian trinity (89) is alien to its sacred counterpart. To start with, the three components are mere “tendencies,” movements toward some end, not complete and perfect ends in themselves. In contrast, the persons of the Holy Trinity are each fully divine. The Catechism teaches that “the divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire,” and cites the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 to support that statement: “Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature.”⁹ God is, in the words of Saint Anselm, a being “than which no greater can be conceived,”¹⁰ whereas a tendency is something than which a greater can easily be conceived, namely the attainment of that towards which it tends. As for the question of power, the parts of the strange trinity are “dominant tendencies,” but they do not dominate jointly—unlike the Holy Trinity, whose persons are consubstantial in their divine essence and might. The three tendencies are “like three different codes of law,”¹¹ and since three *different* codes of law cannot simultaneously hold sway in one and the same jurisdiction, we have to think of the tendencies as competing for dominance over the realm of war. In the Princeton edition the tendencies are said to be “variable in their relationship to one another,” but in the German original they are “*von veränderlicher Größe*” [“of variable magnitude”], which explains the dynamics of the contest between them. As no limits are set to their variations of scale, we may assume that in any given case one tendency could expand so much as to exert a far bigger influence than the others, so that its particular “code of law” would overrule theirs—until it contracted and one of the others expanded to become the new lawgiver, and so on.

The strange trinity reflects the “total phenomenon” of war. It is made up firstly of elemental hatred, secondly of chance and probability, and thirdly of the subordination of war as an instrument of policy. The first aspect is “a blind natural force,” associated mainly with the people. The second, which mainly concerns the commander and his army, offers scope for the free activity of “the creative spirit.” Finally, the policy object of war is a rational pursuit and “the business of government alone.”

Raymond Aron sees the third aspect, war in the service of policy, as the commanding principle of the whole scheme. For him, the trinity confirms the primacy of policy.¹² Peter

⁶ Michael Howard, “Clausewitz *On War*: A History of the Howard-Paret Translation,” Foreword to Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, vi-vii.

⁷ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* online, vol. 30, columns 1903-1912, http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB (accessed January 10, 2021).

⁸ Raymond Aron, *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), I, 46.

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 253.

¹⁰ Quoted in D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 15.

¹¹ In the original German they are called “*Gesetzgebungen*,” which, like the English word “legislation,” refers to the process of enacting laws as well as the code of law that ensues.

¹² Aron, *Penser la guerre* I, 146.

Paret seems to share that view when he says that Clausewitz places politics at the centre of his analysis of the "total phenomenon" of war.¹³ But that misses the real point of the triadic construction, which reduces war's political instrumentality to only one out of three "dominant tendencies" active in war. The policy element is *decentred*, its influence constantly challenged, constrained or overthrown by two other forces with an equal potential for dominance.

II. The Rule of Policy Affirmed

The trinity does not install policy as the controlling factor in war, but in the immediately preceding sections of Chapter One Clausewitz tries very hard to do exactly that—to validate his declaration that war is "merely the continuation of policy by other means" and is thus "a true political instrument" (87). I want to analyze those arguments about the governing relation of the political end to the warlike means, as I think that will bring out more clearly how abrupt and radical is the transition to a contrary viewpoint in the trinity passage.

But it may be helpful at the outset of this discussion to consider a matter that is sometimes thought to make such discussions problematic, and that is the fact that in German the noun *Politik* and the adjective *politisch* can refer to either policy or politics. Christopher Bassford maintains that Clausewitz often fails to clarify which he is talking about, and that "this casual stance results in constant confusion for the reader."¹⁴ Antulio Echevarria agrees that "this dual meaning has led to a great deal of confusion."¹⁵ I cannot say that I have experienced any confusion in this regard, but let us take a closer look and see if we can find some. When we speak of policy, we generally have in mind a purposeful course of action taken by a state or comparable agent, whereas the word politics refers to a process of interaction between different agents seeking to advance their own interests and purposes. Bassford himself gives a lucid and succinct explanation of the difference: "The key distinction between politics and policy lies in interactivity. That is, politics is a multilateral phenomenon, whereas policy is the unilateral sub-component thereof."¹⁶

With this clarification in mind, let us first consider instances where the adjective *politisch* qualifies a noun that signifies an objective or purpose. In such cases it must refer to policy, since politics, in the sense of an interactive relation between different agents pursuing their own objectives, cannot *itself* be said to have an objective. Hence expressions like "*politischer Zweck*" ["political object"] and "*politische Absicht*" ["political intention"] are not ambiguous, since they plainly refer to the objectives or intentions of policy. And just as politics cannot have an objective, neither can it resort to war as an instrument for the realization of an objective, so phrases like "*politisches Instrument*" ["political instrument"] or "*Werkzeug der Politik*" ["instrument of policy"] must refer to war as a means of implementing policy. Clausewitz's terminology does not give rise to confusion here.

But let us also examine section 24 of Chapter One, which bears the famous heading "*Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln*" ["War is merely the continuation of policy by other means"]. Is Clausewitz talking about the continuation of politics or the continuation of policy? The word "Fortsetzung" ["continuation"] occurs again in the first sentence of the text, this time defining war as "eine Fortsetzung des politischen Verkehrs [...] mit anderen Mitteln"—a continuation of political intercourse by other means.¹⁷ That clearly

¹³ Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 168.

¹⁴ Christopher Bassford, "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought," in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, 87.

¹⁵ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 108.

refers to politics, the interaction between different parties, so we might think that the corresponding words in the heading should have been translated as “the continuation of politics by other means.”

In the same breath Clausewitz calls war “*ein wahres politisches Instrument*” [“a true political instrument”], and since politics, as a multilateral process, cannot itself decide to make use of war, this phrase must mean “a true instrument of policy.” So, within the same sentence Clausewitz describes war as the continuation of politics *and* an instrument of policy. Does that mean he is confusing the two things? There is no reason to think so. When the two sides engaged in political intercourse choose war as an instrument for pursuing their rival policies, that also counts as the continuation of politics, the continuation of their interaction. And, of course, it also represents the continuation of policy, the continuation of each side’s policy effort, so from a theoretical point of view it does not matter very much whether the title of this section refers to politics or policy. War is a *continuation* of both.

The statement that war is an “instrument of policy” arises in the context of deliberations about the play of chance and probability in war. This incalculable dimension has a certain allure for the adventurous spirit that is stimulated by danger and uncertainty, and Clausewitz acknowledges the vital importance of such daring in the economy of war: “The element in which war exists is danger. The highest of all moral qualities in time of danger is certainly *courage*” (85). The exemplary hero embraces “the interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad” which makes up the pattern of war, diving “into the element of daring and danger like a fearless swimmer into the current” (86). But alongside that bracing, outdoor vignette, Clausewitz employs another simile to convey the active engagement with uncertainty: he says that the play of chance and probability makes war very much like “a game of cards.” That idea, unlike the image of the diver, brings with it a series of unwholesome associations, including addiction to gambling, high risks, debt and bankruptcy. Clausewitz is certainly worried that the exploits of the intrepid spirit could become ends in themselves, divorced from their proper function in the conduct of war. He warns that war is “no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning,” but “a serious means to a serious end.” The audacious commander in the field must bear in mind that the risks he takes are taken on behalf of the community he serves. Although courage and hardiness are indispensable qualities in the conduct of war, there is no place there for “irresponsible enthusiasts” who enjoy risk for its own sake. Audacity is nothing in itself, it has value only as a means towards the serious policy objective (86). The control perspective is that of policy, because war is “a true political instrument” serving the “designs of policy” (87). It is policy that distinguishes warfare from adventurism, and decides who is fit to participate in war and who is not. Policy lays down the law and warns the bold spirits that they are not allowed to treat war as a mere game. In short, Clausewitz is firmly asserting the primacy and supreme authority of policy in war.

Now, it might be objected that Clausewitz explicitly denies the supreme authority of policy when he remarks that although “war springs from some political purpose,” that “does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant” (87). But here we are in a different context where he is speaking about certain convulsive and intractable forces in war, not about the need to correct wayward individual behaviour. Policy will dominate war, but only to the extent those forces allow. What exactly does Clausewitz have in mind? In the Howard-Paret edition he appears to be talking about the “violent nature” of “all military operations” (87), but in the original German he refers to “*die Natur der [im Kriege] explodierenden Kräfte*”—the nature of the forces that explode in time of war.¹⁸ We can link that image of explosion to Clausewitz’s treatment of mass emotions in their relation to war policy. Popular excitement may contribute greatly to the intensification of war, even to the extent where the existing tension between

¹⁸ Ibid., 108.

two peoples means that an "explosion" of animosity is set off by "the slightest quarrel," so that the violent feelings are "wholly disproportionate" to the political issue (81). In a similar vein Clausewitz speaks of situations where the morale and emotions of the combatants "might be so aroused that the political factor would be hard put to control them" (88). But at this point Clausewitz seems uneasy about the direction of his own argument, and tries, not very successfully, to reassert the leading role of policy. He reasons that if those feelings "are so powerful" (that is, powerful enough to challenge the control of policy), then "there must be a policy of proportionate magnitude." But that makes little sense as it proposes a policy for driving the very forces that threaten to break away from policy (88).

Do we find more clarity in his general remarks about the relation of means and ends, which occur in the same passage where he speaks of the explosive forces in war? Here too the argument is rather confusing. Clausewitz allows that a political aim "must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it" (87). But in that case, we should have to say that the chosen course of action was *not* the means to the desired end, but the means to some completely different end. War in that event would not be an instrument of policy, but an instrument for the radical deflection of policy. Clausewitz seems to have recognized that problem, as he goes on in the following section to argue that the warlike method for achieving policy aims may affect those aims, but "it will never do more than modify them"—which contradicts the idea put forward a few lines previously that the means may "radically change" the original aim. Clausewitz makes a rather curious case for this altered viewpoint: the means can exert only a small influence on the ends because "means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose" (87). He seems to be saying that you have to conceive of an end before you can conceive of a means to that end, but it is difficult to see how his insistence on that logical sequence is relevant to the relation of means and ends in practice. Clausewitz has still not answered the question as to how far the methods of war may further or frustrate the political object that war is supposed to achieve.

He does present a more cogent answer to that question in sections 25 and 26 of Chapter One. He talks here about two different kinds of war, the first of which is so extremely violent that the element of policy seems to disappear altogether, whereas in more limited wars the guiding influence of policy is readily apparent. Clausewitz wants to show that the difference is illusory, since he believes that "both kinds are equally political" (88). How does he try to establish that point once and for all? In the Princeton edition he appears to say that "among the contingencies for which the state must be prepared is a war in which every element calls for policy to be eclipsed by violence" (88), but that is a questionable translation. In the original German¹⁹ Clausewitz does not refer to "every element" of war, but to "the nature of all the circumstances" of a war. Nor does he say that the state "must be prepared" for a war of extremes, he says that policy must take account, "in its calculations," of the circumstances that would tend to produce such a war. We need a fresh, step-by-step analysis of this difficult passage to reveal exactly how it is designed to prove that "All wars can be considered acts of policy," as the title of section 26 proclaims.

Clausewitz images policy as "the intelligence of the personified state" [*die Intelligenz des personifizierten Staates*?] to emphasize that we should understand policy not just as the decision for this or that course of action, but also as the thinking that lies behind such decisions, a process which he calls the "calculations" [*Kalkül*] of policy. He goes on to argue that policy, as the brain of the state, should be smart enough to recognize any set of circumstances under which a decision for war would inevitably result in a war of extreme violence. Whether or not to resort to war under those circumstances would be up to policy. We recall the comments in section 23 that when nations go to war, that is "always due to some political object," and that

¹⁹ Ibid., 109-110.

“war springs from some political purpose” (86-87). It is policy that decides on war, not “circumstances,” though Clausewitz indicates in section 26 that the latter may deeply affect the character of a war, which is why the policy think-tank must always consider that influence in calculating whether or not to go to war. It must extrapolate from “the nature of all the circumstances” what kind of conflict will ensue if there is a decision for war. The implication is that if that particular kind of conflict would not suit the policy object in view, then policy would simply decide not to make war. It follows that if a war of extreme violence occurs, it must have been deliberately chosen for its usefulness to policy. Conversely, policy’s calculations would rule out war altogether if circumstances pointed to a war that would be too violent for the policy aims in view. By these arguments Clausewitz wanted to show that all wars that actually take place, including those of the utmost violence, have been chosen by policy with regard to the purposes of policy. This reveals that policy is not the timid thing it is sometimes taken for, since every example of all-out war in history proves that policy is perfectly capable of embracing all-out war (88).

And so, in section 27 Clausewitz feels that he has demonstrated what he declared in section 24 and now repeats: that war is always “an *instrument of policy*,” and if we thought otherwise, “the entire history of war would contradict us” (88). Only this conception can “unlock the great book and make it intelligible” [“*schließt das große Buch zu verständiger Einsicht auf*”], meaning the great book of history.²⁰ That compendium will baffle us unless we approach it with the key concept that war is an *instrument of policy*.

According to the standard translation, Clausewitz then goes on to say that the most important act of judgment of the statesman and commander is to ascertain “the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” The apparent meaning is that they should avoid waging a kind of war that is alien to the *nature of war*, but that is not what Clausewitz said. The wording in the original German does not speak of “its nature,” but “the nature of the circumstances” [“*der Natur der Verhältnisse*”],²¹ recalling the argument in the previous section about the policy intellect extrapolating from the “circumstances” at any given moment to visualize what kind of war would ensue from a decision to resort to war. The point is the same one in both cases: do not make war if the prevailing *circumstances* will turn it into the kind of war that is unsuited to your aims. Clausewitz promises that he will say more about this matter in the chapter on war plans, but for the time being he draws the discussion to a close: “It is enough, for the moment, to have reached this stage and to have established the cardinal point of view from which war and the theory of war have to be examined” (89). The meaning of the words “it is enough” is that there is no need for anything more. This is clearly an announcement of the *end* of Chapter One, on a note of satisfaction at having found the answer to the question posed in the title of that chapter—“What is war?” Now it seems that we know what war is. It is an “*instrument of policy*,” and with the recognition of that “cardinal point of view” the argument reaches a natural conclusion.

III. The Rival Tendencies Let Loose

Except that Clausewitz then provides, in section 28, a quite different conclusion to Chapter One entitled “The consequences for theory,” where he unfolds his doctrine of the “strange trinity.” Christopher Bassford points out that in the German text the opening remarks about the trinity contain the word “*also*” (therefore), and he complains that this is absent in the Princeton edition so that the explicit continuity between 27 and 28 is concealed in translation:

²⁰ Ibid., 110.

²¹ Ibid.

"By dropping the initial thus, Howard and Paret separate the trinity concept from the rest of the chapter, making it appear to be a new departure."²² Bassford is quite right to censure this omission, but given the fragmentary nature of *On War*, the mere presence of the word "therefore" would not guarantee a logical transition from 27 to 28. That has to be judged by scrutinizing the relation of the two sections, and I will argue that there is no such continuity, that the trinity concept is indeed a new and very far-reaching departure from what goes before. Admittedly, both sections claim to reflect the same reality: 27 appeals to "the entire history of war," while 28 relates to war as "a total phenomenon," which is the same thing by a different name. Another point of contact is the image of war as a "true chameleon" in 28, which seems to echo what is said in 27 about the way that wars vary in accordance with their circumstances and the scope of their political motivation. The chameleon metaphor suggests only a change of colour to match a particular background, it relates to something that "slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case." But most of section 28 is concerned with far more radical variations in the nature of war, and the explanation for that degree of changeability does not match, but entirely supersedes what is said in section 27 about the variety of war. That section concludes by expressing contentment at having discovered "the cardinal point of view" for examining war, namely that war is "an *instrument of policy*." But in section 28, as we have seen, that principle is only one of three "dominant tendencies" which manifest themselves as so many "different codes of law" —three rival legislations of "variable magnitude," constantly vying for sovereignty over the realm of war as they expand and contract in their relative scale.

Section 28, I want to say, advances a quite different theory from that of the previous sections. If the political element of war can expand or contract, then it cannot be said that all wars are "equally political," which is what Clausewitz maintained in section 26. The other two tendencies are also variable in their magnitude, so according to the physics of the trinity either of them could well displace policy as the dominant aspect of war at any time. The strange trinity offers no settled image of war, only the perspective of continuous regime change among its "dominant tendencies."

We need to clarify the point that those tendencies stand for three different agencies consciously following their separate inclinations. The first is impelled by instinctive hatred, the third by "reason alone," both of which are obviously human motives, however disparate. But the second tendency may appear to be an exception if we just focus on the impersonal "play of chance and probability" (89). Christopher Bassford does put that tendency in a class of its own, arguing that chance and probabilities are "*external* to human desire and intent—they represent, purely and simply, the concrete (in this sense, 'objective') reality with which the actors must cope."²³ But it is difficult to conceive how "the play of chance and probability" could be "of variable magnitude," as Clausewitz says all the tendencies are. He tells us "how greatly the objective nature of war makes it a matter of assessing probabilities," and that is immediately followed by another observation on the nature of war, namely that "no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance" (85). So, we have a phenomenon that can always be assessed in terms of its probabilities and is always teeming with chance events that cut across the pattern of probability. It seems that the collision of these two factors is a pervasive and incessant feature of war, not something that could expand or contract from time to time. But the second tendency is not just an objective reality, it also includes a human agency—the "creative spirit" that is free to roam in the dimension of chance and probability, exercising the "play of courage and talent" which flourishes in that environment (89). That is the human motive in the second tendency. The

²² Bassford, "The Primacy of Policy and the "Trinity"," 78.

²³ *Ibid.*, 89.

thing that is of “variable magnitude” therein is the role of the courageous and talented character who adventures freely in the realm of uncertainty and may exert a greater or lesser influence on the course of a war.

We should recall that we have already encountered this *dramatis persona* earlier in Chapter One, in the guise of the undaunted spirit that dives straight into the hazardous and unpredictable element of war. But as we saw in that context, Clausewitz was concerned that the hero might become so absorbed in his exhilarating activity as to lose sight of its ultimate purpose. At that point it seemed that a stern admonition would be enough to remind the adventurer of the “serious end” that he must serve. Clausewitz issued that warning and did not take the matter any further, implying that the fault had thereby been corrected. This was the voice of policy laying down the law and fully expecting to be obeyed (86). Now, however, the “creative spirit” reappears in the context of the trinity as a tendency in its own right, “free to roam” beyond the remit and regulation of policy.

Thomas Waldman would probably take issue with that view, since he claims to perceive “the overarching influence of policy” in the trinitarian framework.²⁴ On that reading, the creative spirit of the second tendency is, in the last analysis, subject to the rational command of policy, but that is to miss the whole point of this theoretical construct. No overarching principle is identified in the framework of the trinity: all of its tendencies have an equal potential to overthrow the others and determine the nature of a particular moment in the history of war. Only in the third tendency is policy the commanding principle, so only in the ambit of that tendency will the energies and skills of war operate in the right measure and manner as to further the aims of policy. But just as policy reigns supreme in the third tendency, so does brutalism in the first and adventurism in the second. They too are independent “legislations,” overriding the influence of policy whenever one of them comes to power. Thus, in one war hatred might preponderate, in another the free play of the adventurous spirit, while one in three might exhibit control over the first two in pursuit of a policy end.

IV. A Stable Theory of War’s Instability

In the scheme of the strange trinity, theory relinquishes its attachment to the primacy of policy, as it must now take equal account of all three tendencies: “A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless” (89). The warning against fixing “an arbitrary relationship” between the three tendencies is clearly a critical reflection on the elevation of policy to the role of permanent controlling factor in section 27. A theory that failed to keep in mind the independent dynamic potential of all three tendencies would not only be “totally useless,” as the standard translation has it: that misguided theory would, in the original German wording, have to be seen as “annihilated” [*vernichtet*].²⁵

How should theory avoid coming to a sticky end in in this perilous environment? The danger is that theory might undergo the same vicissitudes as war itself, defining war according to whichever of the three tendencies loomed largest at any particular time. In that case theory could no longer claim general validity; it would at one moment be a theory of what war is like under the dominance of tendency *a*, then what war is like under tendency *b*, and so on. It would not belong in the “realm of theory,” which Clausewitz defines as “the field of universal truth that cannot be inferred merely from the individual instance under study” (157). To avoid the danger of destroying itself by switching back and forth among the different tendencies,

²⁴ Thomas Waldman, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 180-181.

²⁵ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 111.

theory must preserve itself ("sich [...] erhalte") by "hovering" ["schwebend"]²⁶ between the three tendencies "like an object suspended between three magnets" (89).

Alan Beyerchen made a considerable impression on Clausewitz scholarship when he expanded on the image of the object and the three magnets, proposing that we could understand what Clausewitz means with the help of a device known as the randomly oscillating magnetic pendulum (ROMP). When that pendulum is caught in the fields of attraction of three magnets, it will oscillate back and forth between them in a quite unpredictable pattern, and Beyerchen sees that effect as illustrating how Clausewitz "perceived and articulated the nature of war." He says that the German wording "conveys a sense of on-going motion" as the suspended object responds to the magnetic fields, and that this illustrates how the nature of war follows a "complex trajectory" among the three tendencies of which it is composed.²⁷

But we should note that in Clausewitz's own use of the metaphor, the object suspended between three magnets represents the *theory* of war, not the nature of war itself. Furthermore, it does not oscillate between the magnets in a series of unpredictable responses to their rival attractions, it just remains stationary. Beyerchen explains that a randomly oscillating magnetic pendulum suspended between three magnets sets out on its erratic pathway if it is "pulled aside and let go."²⁸ But Clausewitz refers simply to "an object suspended between three magnets," not "an object suspended between three magnets that you pull aside and then let go." His pendulum is not set off to whizz around in all directions, it is left alone to remain in one position between the magnets. Beyerchen takes the German verb *schweben* to indicate "on-going motion," in this case a darting movement of the pendulum back and forth between the three points of attraction. Now, *schweben* does sometimes refer to motion, but to a gliding or floating movement across a surface, not at all like the jerky, twisting aerobatics of the ROMP. Here Clausewitz uses *schweben* to denote the act of remaining still in the air, like the word "hover" in English. Admittedly, that is not a passive state. Perhaps the most frequent historical use of the concept is to designate how a bird of prey hangs in the air over its territory, a feat that demands a constant effort of resistance to the forces of wind and gravity.

It is in this sense that Clausewitz's pendulum "hovers," resisting the pull of all three magnets. After all, if theory were to behave like the ROMP, it would always be wrong about the nature of war. Every time it veered towards one of the tendencies, it would be turning its back on the others and thereby breaking the rule that it must keep all of them in view. Clausewitz uses the metaphor of the pendulum with specific reference to theory, which hangs within the force-fields of all three magnets but refuses to incline towards any of them. Theory stays alive by holding an unbiased position equidistant between the three tendencies, a position from which it is able to comprehend each development in the "total phenomenon" of war because it is always aware of the equal potential of each tendency to dominate the course of a war.

There is another reason why the ROMP would be an inappropriate model for what Clausewitz calls the "difficult task" of theory (89). It is not very difficult to be dragged hither and thither by magnetic forces: that is simply a passive response to their power. But for the pendulum to "hover," maintaining its autonomy in defiance of those forces, is a fitting analogy for the effort required of theory if it is to resist the temptation to conceive the "total phenomenon" of war in the image of whichever tendency happens to be most powerful at one particular time. Clausewitz's metaphor represents the ideal stability of theory in the face

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17 (1992-93): 69-71.

²⁸ Ibid., 69.

of war's mutability. It is that theoretical equilibrium which enables Clausewitz himself to grasp the nature of war as a trinity of tendencies, rather than defining it in accordance with whichever tendency he experienced as dominant at one point in time.

In the framework of the strange trinity, we can speak of *theory* attaining equilibrium, but war itself appears as an irredeemably unstable process, subject to constant disruption because of the triple dynamic of its separate tendencies. Thomas Waldman takes a rather different view. He seeks to understand "how the trinity operates as a whole," insisting that "this holistic perspective is crucial." He asserts that "the trinity is a unity" representing "the final synthesis" of Clausewitz's thoughts on war.²⁹ But if the trinity really was a synthesis, a combination of separate elements to make up a whole, then it would not comprise three "different codes of law": those legislations would be fused together in one supreme code of law, whereas in the trinity they remain separately active, expanding or contracting, and gaining or losing control over war accordingly. Waldman's "holistic perspective" does not derive from the text of section 28, so where does it come from? His pronouncement that "the trinity is a unity" has about it a whiff of incense, which gets more pungent when he invokes Hew Strachan's comment that "this trinity, like the Christian trinity, really is three elements united in one."³⁰ But this trinity is in fact a travesty of that trinity. Its elements are "united in one" only in the tenuous sense that they are all aspects of one phenomenon, the phenomenon of war, and that does not imply their integration in one identity. The tendencies remain sharply differentiated, each with its own momentum and will to power. War, as the product of its conflicting tendencies, is a discontinuous, disintegrative phenomenon, not at all comparable with the Christian trinity. I think that Waldman started from a mistakenly reverential premise when he set out to discover "how the trinity operates as a whole."

Andreas Herberg-Rothe also views the trinity as a kind of synthesis. He interprets the three tendencies as representing the three "rationalities" of war—the violent means, the military aim, and the political purpose—and argues that "in the 'trinity' Clausewitz consistently attempts to reconcile the various rationalities and to use their conflict as the basis to develop his political theory of war." Claiming to follow Clausewitz's "methodological approach in the trinity," Herberg-Rothe arrives at a definition of strategy as the "maintenance of the floating balance of purpose, aims and means in warfare."³¹ But in the trinity passage there is no wording to indicate a reconciliation of the three tendencies. Only within the third tendency can we assume that the violent means, the military aim, and the political purpose are fully integrated, but that is achieved by the subordination of war to policy, not by a "floating balance" between the three tendencies. That image of equilibrium refers instead to the role of theory, which experiences the attraction of all three tendencies but remains still, in recognition of the equal potential they all have to seize and lose control of war. There is no "floating balance" between those tendencies: they are laws unto themselves, constantly at odds within the anarchic universe of the trinity. The first and second tendencies could be called "rationalities" only if they were tied to the ultimate rationality of the political purpose, but that state of affairs is achieved only inside the third tendency, not across the trinity itself.

A different approach again is adopted by Colin Fleming, who denies that the trinity is a synthesis of what has gone before. Instead, he concedes what I have argued above: that this passage plainly contradicts the line of argument defining war as an instrument of policy. He confirms that in the trinitarian analysis "war's political rationale is subsumed by the competing elements of the formula." Unfortunately, however, Fleming perceives this as an "anomaly"

²⁹ Waldman, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity*, 161, 172, 174, 181.

³⁰ Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War*, 178.

³¹ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, "Clausewitz's Concept of Strategy—Balancing Purpose, Aims and Means," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 (2014): 922-923.

that needs to be put right. He is concerned that Clausewitz's trinity "undermines his core political argument," and he thinks the proper solution is to edit the trinity theory by reference to that control doctrine. He appeals to those parts of the text in which Clausewitz teaches the primacy of policy, and then argues that we should impose that principle on the trinity passage, since the rest of his writings "suggests that policy remained the predominant element of the trinity." Fleming declares in effect that Clausewitz does not mean what he says in section 28, he actually means something completely different that he said elsewhere. Fleming concludes with a proposal for "realigning the Trinity to better link with Clausewitz's wider ideas related to politics." This is a quite astonishing suggestion. Fleming claims that "the position is subtle," but it is in fact a brutally frank recommendation for doctoring one part of Clausewitz's text to fit in with other parts. How exactly we should "realign" the trinity is not spelled out, but given its radical departure from the policy paradigm, such a revision would clearly involve a lot of red ink. Scholars may criticize Clausewitz all they want, but they have no license to alter anything he said and turn it into what they think he ought to have said. Fleming's advice is not a subtle position, it is more like an indecent proposal.³²

I believe we have to accept that Clausewitz provides Chapter One with two contradictory endings, though that is not necessarily the state in which he wanted to leave it. We should bear in mind that he never completed a final version of his treatise for publication. The first edition was pieced together from the manuscripts he left behind after his death, and we cannot take that legacy as reflecting his final intentions. Marie von Clausewitz records that her husband was eager to resume work on his treatise once the Polish crisis of 1831 was over, so he clearly regarded it as an unfinished project (66). In that light we can perhaps see the dual ending of Chapter One as the record of a dispute with himself that he wanted to revisit and resolve at a later date. If he had lived to do so, would he have stuck to the definition of war as an instrument of policy, as ostensibly proven in section 27, or would he have developed the new and quite different theory of the "strange trinity" adumbrated in section 28? We cannot know the answer to that question, but it does seem very likely that Chapter One was still a working draft that ended with a dilemma yet to be resolved.

It is important to bring out the chasm between the alternative endings of Chapter One, the vast divergence between these two answers to the question "What is war?" Section 27 defines war by reference to its political function, whereas section 28 implies the *dysfunctionality* of war. Of the three "tendencies" in war, only the third, the one driven by policy, is associated with reason, being "subject to reason alone," while the first and second are subject to blind instinct and the enjoyment of adventure respectively. In practical terms the rational tendency stands out against the others in that it is the only one which fights a war for the sake of concluding it. The blind instinct of hatred finds in war the ideal medium for its self-expression, so it will naturally desire the prolongation of war, not an end to it. The same is true of the spirit of daring and risk-taking, which finds its element in "the play of chance and probability" so characteristic of war. This tendency too must want war to continue indefinitely since war is the perfect milieu for its activity. Only the rational, political tendency drives war in pursuit of something that lies beyond war, a new and enhanced condition of peace. Only under that tendency does war have a function beyond itself, but since the two other tendencies have just as much potential for seizing control of war, we should have to conclude that war is more often than not a dysfunctional undertaking.

If those are "the consequences for theory," what are the pragmatic consequences, the consequences for policy? In other parts of his treatise Clausewitz teaches that war is simply the continuation of policy "by other means," and sometimes gives the impression that policy

³² Colin M. Fleming, *Clausewitz's Timeless Trinity: A Framework for Modern War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 2-3.

enjoys a natural and comfortable relation with those means. In Chapter Six of Book Eight he says that the broad conduct of war is “policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws” (610). Here the pen and the sword are inert tools of the trade, interchangeably subservient to policy, which in either case proceeds on the steady course of “its own laws.” That image of the unproblematic usefulness of war helps to illuminate, by way of extreme contrast, the place of policy in the trinity. In that concept, the trusty “sword” turns into a pair of autonomous “tendencies”—blind hatred and the lust for adventure—which follow their own laws in defiance of the laws of policy. There may be some consolation for policy in the thought that it still wields a well-tempered blade in the third tendency, which represents the subordination of war as an instrument of policy. But we have to recognize that the reign of policy is confined to that tendency and does not apply to the trinity overall. Outside the third tendency the other two run wild along the vectors of their own impulsion and are just as likely as policy to shape war in their own image. The political object does not disappear altogether, but only intermittently will it retain control over the course of a war, as the other tendencies are pulling in directions that threaten to overwhelm the influence of policy. The mindless violence of the first tendency is liable to make war into a senseless bloodbath, while the second allows brilliant military buccaneers to indulge in the sheer excitement of gambling with danger at the state’s expense. All of that makes war a highly dubious instrument of policy. If the astute policy makers, described by Clausewitz as “the intelligence of the personified state,” were to ponder the “strange trinity” and accept it as a valid image of war, they would surely then lay down a general rule to avoid the pursuit of policy “by other means.”

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