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2 – In Defence of Ontogenesis and For a General Ecology of War (Bousquet)

With *War in International Thought*, Jens Bartelson sets out to show us how our visions of political order are tributary of a violent imaginary we are today only dimly aware of. The study thus takes as its primary object of investigation the long-standing belief 'that war is a productive force in human affairs that ought to be harnessed for the right political purposes, such as the creation of order and peace.'[1] Authoritatively marshalling an impressive survey of both historical and contemporary writings, Bartelson's main contention is that the widespread adoption and promotion of this belief in the modern era was instrumental to the legitimation of the emerging state form and accompanying international system. Moreover, he asserts that the persistence of this ontogenetic understanding of war serves to perpetuate organised violence in the world today, foreclosing other, more peaceful, political imaginaries. In this intervention, I will review the book's central arguments before making the case that, on both analytical and political grounds, we cannot dispense with ontogenesis in the manner Bartelson enjoins us to but must instead radicalise it in the form of a general ecology of war.

The idea that the rise of the modern state is inextricable from war is hardly new, of course. However, Bartelson is explicitly not interested in determining the effects of actually occurring war upon state formation in the manner of historical sociologists such as Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, or Anthony Giddens.[2] Instead, he is concerned exclusively with the *meaning* given to war, those 'linguistic conventions that govern the use of its concept' and their performative effects in the constitution of political order.[3] As such, the proposed approach of a 'historical ontology of war' seeks to excavate 'the presuppositions underlying the conception of war.'[4] Ultimately, Bartelson's focus lies with a particular view of war that he holds to have been dominant until its sudden abandonment in the second half of the twentieth century and to have grounded the various historical, geographic, and legal narratives that underpin the modern state. Dubbed 'ontogenetic war', this understanding of war posits it to be 'a primordial force that imposes structure on a world that otherwise would

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[1] Jens Bartelson, *War in International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 15.
[2] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States AD 990–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power – Vol.1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power – Vol.2: The Rise of Classes and Nation States 1760-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993); Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence - A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism Vol.2* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985).
[3] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 23.
[4] Ibid., 1.

too chaotic to be accessible to understanding and hence also beyond the reach of human intervention.'[5]

Through an elegant and erudite overview of the historiographic, geographic, and legal discourses that sought to legitimise the modern state's claim to sovereignty, Bartelson shows that these all presupposed, with varying degrees of explicitness, a background condition of primordial war that the state purports to escape from through its own judicious wielding of martial power. Each of the core chapters is dedicated to one of these discourses, tracing its development across the three time periods of the early modern era, the Enlightenment, and the late nineteenth century.[6] Along the way, the study puts forward several propositions that challenge established views within existing scholarship and that are likely to provoke fruitful debate for some time to come. Among these is the claim that, contra prevalent Schmittian narratives,[7] there was no 'clean break between war as punishment of evildoers or law enforcement, on the one hand, and war as an armed contest between moral and legal equals, on the other' and that in fact both notions supported one another well into the modern period.[8] Bartelson likewise purports to complicate postcolonial narratives in contending that the exclusion of non-Europeans peoples from emerging international society was not premised on an originary presumption of European superiority (an article of faith which cohered only later as a largely post-facto rationalisation informed by evolutionary thinking) but instead sprung from 'the inner logic of international law' and its need for a constitutive outside.[9]

Central to Bartelson's account is the identification of the various 'looping effects' and 'double binds' that hitch the emerging state form to the ontogenetic view of war. In the first instance, the state's claim to political authority is 'legitimized with reference to the violence that would ensue in its absence, while the use of force [is] consistently justified with reference to sovereign authority.'[10] Similarly, the drive towards the territorial demarcation

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[5] Ibid., 16.
[6] While I do not wish to quibble with Bartelson's choice of historical periods for his tracing of the ontogenetic view of war, it is rather surprising that fascism does not receive a single mention throughout since its ideology and political manifestations arguably represent the apogee of such a view.
[7] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press, 2006); Stephen C. Neff, *War and the Law of Nations: A General History* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[8] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 7.
[9] Ibid., 130.
[10] Ibid., 34.

and unification of states insistently invokes a latent threat of domestic unrest and external warfare with the resulting cartographic representations reinforcing the imaginary of a world divided into hostile geographic entities.[11] Finally, international law justifies its existence by reference to a prior condition of unbridled and unregulated war while in turn drawing the distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate manifestations of organised violence that are necessary to outline this conception of primal war in the first place.[12] Through the identification of these mutually-reinforcing feedback loops, Bartelson develops the kind of emergent account of state and war that is typically foreclosed to positivist analyses that treat phenomena as 'transhistorical problems' imbued with 'timeless meaning.'[13] In this sense, the book usefully complements the existing narratives of the rise of the state found within the canons of historical sociology by showing that the conceptualisation of war as ontogenetic was itself one of the processes through which, in Tilly's famous phrase, 'war made the state, and the state made war'.[14]

Yet the author of *War in International Thought* strives for more than an original contribution to the historiography of state formation or the deep intellectual history of war's conceptualisation, although he certainly amply succeeds on both these fronts. Indeed, Bartelson bookends the study with a pointed intervention into the phenomenon of war in contemporary international politics and its conceptualisation within current scholarship. Put simply, his claim is that, after a brief interlude roughly lasting the duration of the Cold War, ontogenetic war is now back with a vengeance. Moreover, much of the intellectual response, including of the critical variety, is deemed inapt to resisting its 'tragic and disastrous' effects.[15] Bartelson sees in the new propensity for military intervention in the name of humanitarian emergency, state-building, and democracy-export the return of an understanding of war as generative of political order. In common with many other critics, Bartelson is unpersuaded by both the imperialist and cosmopolitan justifications for these uses of armed force and warns that this new interventionism is 'likely to generate more conflict rather than world peace.'[16] However, he simultaneously takes aim at all those critical scholars who denounce these wars while simultaneously endorsing versions of ontogenetic

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[11] Ibid., 93.
[12] Ibid.,134.
[13] Ibid., 29.
[14] Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton , NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.42
[15] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*., 201.
[16] Ibid., 195.

war, whether through their alignment with the affirmation of the constitutive power of violence and war upon the political found in the works of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben or the more general proposition advanced by Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton of a foundational War/Truth relation.[17] Such perspectives, he concludes, 'cannot hope to provide contemporary attempts to restrain the use of force with any solid moral or legal foundation.'[18]

Although he does not spell this out as such, one is led to infer that Bartelson mourns the demise of a putative Westphalian norm of non-intervention consistently trampled by the new interventionism. Thus, he charges new conceptualisations of war formulated by scholars grappling with the changing manifestations of armed conflict with going 'some way toward justifying global or imperial wars simply by nullifying many of the restrictions that were coeval with the modern distinction between civil and international wars.'[19] There is a certain irony here, of course, in that we find Bartelson seemingly hankering for the vision of a Westphalian order that his book otherwise painstakingly shows to have been brought about by the very ontogenetic view he wants us to dispense with. Nor does his own account give us much reason to view these restrictions as anything but fleeting and unreliable, given that 'the connection between norms of sovereignty and non-intervention is a rather recent invention, dating no further back than to the United Nations Charter and the Cold War' and perhaps even less than that if we trace it to when 'decolonization had been more or less completed.'[20]. To which one could add that superpower interventions during the Cold War - the US wars in Southeast Asia being the most emblematic example - suggest rather more historical continuity in the attempts to shape political order through armed force than Bartelson wants to allow for.

In the final instance, we see that what troubles Bartelson most about 'ontogenetic war' is that it makes 'war look as an inescapable part of the human condition and a natural fact of political life'.[21] Attributing generative powers to war is therefore, in his view, tantamount to 'relinquishing human responsibility for the phenomenon of war.'[22] The study of the belief in

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[17] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of The Political* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Tarak Barkawi & Shane Brighton, "Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique," *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 126–43; Tarak Barkawi & Shane Brighton, this volume.
[18] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 32.
[19] Ibid., 12.
[20] Ibid., 188.
[21] Ibid., 24.
[22] Ibid., 201.

ontogenetic war thus has as its ultimate aim the 'loosening [of] its grip on our political imagination'[23] as the essential pre-condition for 'bringing war back within the scope of human volition and responsibility.'[24] Given the gravity and consequence of such a project, it is essential that we tease out here the implicit ontology that motivates the rejection of ontogenetic war so that we may take a full measure of the theoretical stakes and the kind of politics that might flow from them.

To all intents and purposes, the ontology posited by *War in International Thought* is a resolutely anthropocentric and idealist one according to which the only reality we can properly speak of is one which is exclusively constituted though the human subject's powers of meaning-making. In the context that interests us, this ultimately means that war is nothing more than 'what we make of it through our creative tampering with the linguistic conventions that govern the use of its concept.'[25] This focus on the linguistic construction of the world does not thereby make Bartelson into the kind of postmodern nihilist that would dissolve the subject into a surface-effect of impersonal discursive formations, however. On the contrary, he hews to a profoundly humanist faith in our agentic powers to reshape the world, above all through our foundational projections of meaning upon it. 'From definitions of war follow normative principles, and from those principles follow rules that make it possible to promote or restrict the violent practices thus defined: our moral and legal responses to war are always already conditioned by practices of definition and classification.'[26] The greatest human tragedy, from this perspective, is our tendency to assign generative powers to entities other than ourselves.[27] The *belief* in ontogenetic war is therefore to be banished because it dispossesses humans of the responsibilities and agency over armed conflict – and ultimately, one presumes, of the possibility to end it once and for all. Even more fundamentally, Bartelson proclaims that 'we should refrain from attributing ontogenetic capacities to anything but ourselves.'[28]

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[23] Ibid, 22.
[24] Ibid., 3.
[25] Ibid., 23.
[26] Ibid., 11-12.
[27] Bartelson repeatedly notes that the central problem animating modern societies is that of *secular* statecraft, of determining the grounds for the legitimation of political authority without appeal to divine sanction. One way of reading the tacit narrative of the book is that modern human societies have displaced the attribution of ontogenetic powers from a personalised, willing God to an impersonal, indifferent force of war.
[28] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 24.

And yet, for all the precautions taken, material and extra-discursive agencies cannot help but here and there creep back into the narrative. In accounting for the sudden demise of an ontogenetic view of war 'marginalised and even forgotten' in the second half of the twentieth century,[29] Bartelson places great emphasis on the invention of nuclear weapons, the consequences of which were so dramatic they 'convinced Western elites that war could no longer serve any constructive purposes whatsoever'[30] and even 'changed the meaning of life itself.'[31] The momentous existential impact of the nuclear revolution is hardly one that can be disputed. However, it seems difficult to account for the bearing of nuclear weaponry on international politics solely in terms of our linguistic constructions of war when it is the contrived splitting of atomic nuclei that presses itself so insistently on our consciousness. Is this not an instance of the very material conditions of war forcing us to think otherwise about it? Moreover, is the genesis of nuclear weapons not exemplary of the internal dynamics of war with their escalatory logic and entrainment of science and technology to destructive ends?[32]

Elsewhere, it is in the third chapter on 'fortifying the state' that we particularly see material practices of state-building come to the fore. Bartelson seeks to show how 'largely symbolic claims to sovereignty embodied in early modern maps were translated into actual claims to territorial authority', most notably through the erection of fortifications.[33] Maps can of course convey meaning as representational practices that serve to affirm rhetorically state sovereignty and embody its spatial imaginary. Their effects cannot however be reduced to the aforementioned when they also demonstrably function as essential components of practical exercises in the navigation, occupation, and control of territory. Bartelson does not deny this altogether, acknowledging that 'advances in cartography were prompted by military necessity and […] these advances, in turn, contributed to the evolution of military strategy.'[34] Yet he appears in the final instance determined to make maps and fortifications the mere servants of epistemic frameworks and state claims to sovereignty and foreclose any possibility that we might grant their material spheres of activity any autonomy. Never is he more explicit about

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[29] Ibid., 8.
[30] Ibid., 184.
[31] Ibid., 14.
[32] Antoine Bousquet, "A Revolution in Military Affairs? Changing Technologies and Changing Practices of Warfare" *in* Daniel R. McCarthy (ed.), *Technology and World Politics: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2009).
[33] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*., 94.
[34] Ibid., 97.

this than when he warns against 'attribut[ing] causal powers to inanimate objects such as maps.'[35]

While Bartelson accepts that advances in cartography played a crucial role in the creation of modern states, he essentially wants to restrict their status to that of mere relays for prior conceptions of sovereignty, territory, and war. So when he tells us that 'maps are nothing more and nothing less than instruments of power'[36], his understanding of them is very much in terms of, following Bruno Latour, 'intermediaries' that 'transport meaning or force without transformation' rather than 'mediators' that 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.'[37] Yet once we grasp maps as 'material anchors' for conceptual representation, symbolic manipulation, and cognitive operations, it becomes impossible to reduce the geospatial exercises entered into by their users to the original intentionality of map-makers.[38] Through the workings of a cartographic reason that resides in the criss-crossing feedback between map and mind, novel spatial navigations and territorial occupancies become realisable, as do unprecedented modes of military operability.[39]

Although relatively brief, Bartelson's treatment of fortification[40] is empirically rich and nuanced, hinting at the complex weave of terrain, architecture, geometry, statistics, engineering, building materials, dynastic ambitions, and military necessity that makes up its history. Yet, when it comes to summing up, this dense thicket of relations gets promptly flattened once again into the 'concerted effort of generations of surveyors and military engineers' invested in 'large-scale fortifications and infrastructural improvements to bring state territories in conformity with the claims to sovereign authority that long had been represented on maps.'[41] That the location and designs of viable fortifications permitted by physical geography and the state of engineering under the contemporaneous conditions of military capabilities might have shaped the territorial imaginaries of states, although tacitly admitted elsewhere, thereupon falls by the wayside. Ultimately, Bartelson is interested in

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[35] Ibid., 96

[36] Ibid., 96.

[37] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

[38] Edwin Hutchins, "Material Anchors for Conceptual Blends," *Journal of Pragmatics* Vol.37, No.10 (2005).

[39] Antoine Bousquet, *The Eye of War: Military Perception from the Telescope to The Drone* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 119-152.

[40] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 108-117.

[41] Ibid., 127.

fortification less in its incarnated specificity than as a generic 'model' for the realisation of 'abstract conceptions of territory.'[42] Thus, he suggests that 'the fortress served as templates for territorial defense and domestic pacification, in similar way as the panopticon was to serve as a paradigm of surveillance.'[43] Yet, if we are to approach fortification in the manner of the panopticon, then we surely need to attend to it as 'a systematically functional architecture: a space organized by certain demands of utilization and worked out rigorously to facilitate them.'[44] Just as Bentham's prison design sought to employ geometric arrangements of masonry to govern visibility and invisibility, so did modern fortifications adopt a geometric plan to, inter alia, create interlocking fields of fire and minimise vulnerability to enemy artillery. Only by obstinately cleaving to a frictionless instrumentalism can such spheres of micro-political activity be thought of as mere second-order effects of grand political designs.

At this point, some readers may object that I am committing the reviewer's cardinal sin of taking issue with a book for what it is not. And certainly, taken on its own terms, *War in International Thought* is an exemplary work of political theory that contributes greatly to our historical understanding of war's conceptualisation and the modern political effects of its reification. We cannot however neglect the stakes involved in Bartelson's wider insistence on an idealist and anthropocentric ontology that renders material objects into passive conduits of human intentionality. Indeed, such a commitment stands squarely in the way of a truly 'ecological' approach to war sensitive to mutually constitutive relations between conventionally discrete orders of nature, society, and technique.[45] Ecology does not here stand so much for an emphasis on the natural environment than a broader theoretical and methodological disposition that puts the co-evolution of beings and their milieus at its heart and fully embraces the feedback looping effects dear to Bartelson. Such an approach cannot of course do without the notion of ontogenesis, the engines of which are distributed and extend far beyond human agency.[46]

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[42] Ibid., 94.
[43] Ibid., 108-109.
[44] Paul Hirst, *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p.170.
[45] Jairus Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
[46] Gilbert Simondon, "*The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,*" *Parrhesia* No.7 (2009); Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013)

If, as we are told, the ontogenetic view entails positing war as 'a mysterious and impersonal force,'[47] perhaps it is necessary to resolutely double down on this by affirming the essence of war as fundamentally unknowable. Such a commitment would entail contesting the 'general agreement to the effect that at least *some* definition is necessary for all further theoretical and empirical enquiry into the phenomenon of war and its causes'[48] that Bartelson traces back at least to Carl von Clausewitz.[49] In doing so, we would not, however, be simply returning to a pre-Clausewitzian conception of war as a quasi-numinous power 'capable of producing substances only because it lacked a substance of its own.'[50] On the contrary, the steadfast refusal to specify war is here intended to foreclose the possibility of invoking war in any facile way so as 'explain and justify political processes and their outcomes'[51] since it becomes necessary to always pass through specific processes, operations, and mediations. Nor does it require us to ascribe a singular ontogenetic power to war such as that of ordering the world but merely to recognise its indubitable affinity to the wildest and most disruptive tendencies of a world of becoming. Such an approach calls less for a return to materialism, however new-fangled, than the constitution of a radical empiricism suited to engage with the messiness of the world with its congeries of beings and mangle of events, in which 'what really exists is not things made, but things in the making.'[52] In its martial variant, this empiricism orients us towards the enfolding of intensities, relations, and attributes that give rise to war's givenness or actuality through the investigation of such fields of activity as mobilisation, design, and encounter.[53]

We are here in presence of major philosophical options, to be sure, incommensurate theoretical points of departure that have to be affirmed more than they can demonstrated, and which may have different virtues to recommend each of them. Bartelson may indeed find any restriction on human agency a price too high to pay. A radical empiricism is however not tantamount to a wholesale negation of agency, merely the recognition that any agency, including over the phenomenon of war, is always assembled, situated, and contingent.

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[47] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 16.
[48] Ibid., 2-3.
[49] In this regard, Barkawi and Brighton remain true inheritors of Clausewitz with their definition of war as "fighting" (or *Schlacht*). Barkawi & Brighton, "Powers of War".
[50] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 75.
[51] Ibid., 16.
[52] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 117.
[53] Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove, & Nisha Shah, "Becoming War: Towards a Martial Empiricism", *Security Dialogue* (2020). See also Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove & Nisha Shah, "Becoming Weapon: An Opening Call to Arms", *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol.5, No.1 (2017).

Conversely, the notion of unalloyed, sovereign human agency could well be thought of as of no less a theoretical fiction than the primordial state of war posited by the classical advocates of ontogenetic war. Nevertheless, one might retort that, in accordance with the notion that 'the belief that some things have ontogenetic capacities might itself be ontogenetic,'[54] the fiction of unsullied human agency might be self-fulfilling, a vision of the human subject bootstrapping itself into immaculate self-governance. Indeed, at the heart of Bartelson's argument seems to lie the conviction that if only war could be shown not to be a 'natural fact' or an 'inescapable' condition, that our 'violent imaginaries' are just that, that war is merely a human invention, we could be done with it once and for all through appeals to innate rationality and enlightened self-interest.

Perhaps Bartelson is right and we need to all get behind the inviting voluntarism of this political wager. There are grounds for scepticism however, not least because a long lineage of alternative pacifist imaginaries has decidedly failed to extirpate the drive for war, notwithstanding the extent to which we have 'become accustomed to thinking of war as profoundly destructive of political order and therefore morally undesirable.'[55] Nor can we find much succour in the pieties of international law, including the post-war norms of non-intervention that the powerful always disregarded at their leisure or of sovereignty that served to lock in the purposefully unviable polities left by the colonial legacy. If, on the other hand, the emergence and persistence of armed conflict is indeed assembled from a web of relations binding a medley of bodies, objects, ideas, practices, and affects, the task at hand demands more from us than exposing the conceptual underpinnings of war. For then surely only the patient, arduous, and piecemeal work of mapping the planetary ecology of war can begin to equip us with the means to build and sustain future ecologies of peace.

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[54] Ibid., 24.
[55] Ibid,, 13.