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Becoming War: Towards a Martial Empiricism

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Abstract

Under the banner of *martial empiricism*, we advance a distinctive set of theoretical and methodological commitments for the study of war. Previous efforts to wrestle with this most recalcitrant of phenomena have sought to ground research upon primary definitions or foundational ontologies of war. By contrast, we propose to embrace war's incessant becoming, making its creativity, mutability, and polyvalence central to our enquiry. Leaving behind the interminable quest for its essence, we embrace war as mystery. We draw on a tradition of radical empiricism to devise a conceptual and contextual mode of enquiry that can follow the processes and operations of war wherever they lead us. Moving beyond the instrumental appropriations of strategic thought and the normative strictures typical of critical approaches, martial empiricism calls for an unbounded investigation into the emergent and generative character of war. Framing the accompanying special issue, we outline three domains around which to orient future research: mobilization, design, and encounter. Martial empiricism is no idle exercise in philosophical speculation. It is the promise of a research agenda apposite to the task of fully contending with the momentous possibilities and dangers of war in our time.

Key words: war, mobilization, design, empiricism, William James, ontology

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The Mystery of War

“We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very patency, or the truth, of the real... [W]ar is produced as the pure experience of pure being.” So writes Emmanuel Levinas in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* (2011: 21). In an opus dedicated to extricating meaning from a universe caught between the stark finitude of death and the tumultuous boundlessness of being, Levinas asserts the brute fact of war and its power to lay bare the real.

Writing in the grim aftermath of a Holocaust whose clutches he ironically only escaped through internment in German POW camps and under the brooding shadow of thermonuclear obliteration, Emanuel Levinas wagers that for all that war seems to be on the side of absolute destruction it precipitates infinite possibilities. Rather than explain away or shut out the horror before him, Levinas reaches for creativity – the possibility of becoming within finitude – in the most abject and terrifying catastrophe of human experience. For it is in war that death – “a menace that approaches [us] as a mystery” (235) – most patently affirms itself as the interval “between being and nothingness” which marks “the very rupture that creation operates in being” (58). A universe that tolerates freedom must allow not only for the coexistent possibility of annihilation but for their dual intimacy within a creative and uncertain process: “The possibility, retained by the adversary, of thwarting the best laid calculations expresses the separation, the breach of totality, across which the adversaries approach one another. The warrior runs a risk; no logistics guarantees victory. The calculations that make possible the determination of the outcome of a play of forces within a totality do not decide war (222-223).” For Levinas, this realization is the grounding for a meditation upon the conditions of ethical encounter with the radical Other. We choose here instead to dwell a bit longer in “the last interval which consciousness cannot traverse,” the bewildering interregnum that is war’s dominion (235).

Haunting the formations and deformations of global life, war confronts us as an abyss in the face of which cherished interpretative frameworks perilously buckle and warp. Indeed, Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton (2011: 129) accurately identify a “conceptual black hole surrounding the notion of war” that has insistently gnawed at the study of the phenomenon. Locating the source of this lacuna in the absence of an “ontology of war”, they propose to

ground one in “fighting” (136). Although we concur on the diagnosis, we take issue with the suggested remedy. War does not obey any neat philosophical division between epistemology and ontology. For us, the resolute elusiveness of any definite understanding of war is inherent to that very object. Every attempt to conceptually shackle war is undone by the creative advance of its new modes, residences, and intensities. This speaks less against the value of ontology per se than it calls for a strange, paradoxical, and provisional ontology that is consonant with the confounding mutability of war. Such an ontology, suspended between infinity and totality, being and nothingness, the sheer fecundity and utter catastrophe of war, may not be too uncanny for its object. In fairness, Barkawi and Brighton gesture toward this in acknowledging “war’s recalcitrance as an object of knowledge” and allowing for war to unmake any truth (133). Yet they seem unwilling to embrace the full force of their own insight, which Marc Von Boemcken (2016: 14) ultimately declares: “even the statement that ‘war is fighting’ may well be eventually undone by war. In a very fundamental manner, war escapes human intelligibility.”

This special issue on “Becoming War” explores war as an obdurate mystery, a mystery whose manifold processes and paradoxes continue to perplex us, both in its complex ordering for the ultimate end of destruction and its stubborn offense to the better world we all purport to want. Our world is one shot through by war, manifest in the nation-states we inhabit, the ecologies of technics that bind us to one another, and the very thoughts ricocheting through our communities of sense. *And yet we still do not know war.*

Rather than endeavour yet again to “say something fundamental about what war *is*” (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 134), we choose to explore how war *becomes*. This is not to say that we deny any durability or regularities in the phenomenon of war over time. Simply that, as Alfred Whitehead puts it (1978: 53), “there is no continuity of becoming, only a becoming of continuity.” Accordingly, we seek to trace the lines of becoming that congeal into what comes to count as war, even as it continually frays at the edges and insolently defies habituated frames of reference. We do not therefore offer a theory of continuity, a formula for what all lines of becoming war might have in common, but instead sketch a style of investigation that encompasses both the enduring cohesion and radical dispersion of war. We call this endeavour “martial empiricism” to renounce attempts to devise a definitive theory of war. Instead, we favour an open-ended conceptual arsenal for following the trail of war wherever it leads us, as opposed to camping in the places we already expect to find it.

Although we do not aim to circumscribe the remit of its investigations, martial empiricism is nonetheless inherently situational, spurred by the impulse to grasp the present martial condition we inhabit in all its calamity and promise. We would be far from the first to point out the growing inadequacy of the conceptual frameworks of war inherited from the Westphalian historical interval. Yet we still collectively flounder in the face of a combined and uneven landscape of armed conflict populated by metastasizing war machines encompassing overseas contingency operations, full-spectrum hybrid theaters, ethno-supremacist militias, crowd-sourced paramilitaries, Incel shooters, and narco-state assassins. The game is definitely up when a task force led by the former head of United States Central Command can write that “basic categories such as ‘battlefield,’ ‘combatant’ and ‘hostilities’ no longer have clear or stable meaning” (Abizaid and Brooks, 2014: 35). Confronted with this perplexing reality and our persistent bewilderment, a certain epistemic humility is in order. Rather than profess to know where war begins and ends, martial empiricism starts in the middle with only the barest tentative intuitions necessary to explore the logistics, operations, and embodiments that engender armed conflict as an unremitting condition of global life.²

After a brief review of the existing scholarship on war, we expand on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of martial empiricism. Drawing on the contributions to this Special Issue, we outline three processes around which we might begin to reorient research on war. *Mobilizing war* covers the inciting, gathering, and channelling of energies without which armed conflict would be impossible. *Designing war* attends to the work of intelligences and technics that constitutes the activity of warfare. *Encountering war* returns us to the ground level of our radical empiricism, the experiential site of the fissiparous subjectivities traversed by the flux of becoming war.

The Study of War So Far

² We use the terms of war, armed conflict, and organized and collective violence interchangeably throughout, each of which should be understood in the most capacious and open-ended sense possible, in accordance with our ontological commitments. As we have covered in a previous special issue (Bousquet, Grove and Shah, 2017), the question of what counts as a weapon is no less indeterminate. And while we cannot develop this further here, we also note that the conceptualization of violence on which common definitions of war hang is subject to intense philosophical (and political) contest that extends to the question of its very intelligibility (Dodd, 2014).

The study of war has been submitted to a wide range of theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches over the years. An abundant literature has framed war as an instrument, outcome, or instantiation of broader political, social, and economic forces. These contributions have generated rich accounts of diverse causal and constitutive mechanisms of war and their geopolitical ramifications. It is impossible to review the entire gamut of approaches undertaken across a variety of disciplines that have attended to the question of armed conflict. We therefore restrict ourselves to some observations on the field of International Relations (IR) and the limitations we find therein, but believe the import of our claims range further.

Cohering in the aftermath of the Second World War, IR was indisputably founded with the question of war and peace as its defining concern. Yet, from the outset, it broached the object of war as something that should be accountable to certain causal regularities, even laws. This disposition is most apparent in the tallying and categorizations of armed conflicts and the quest for causal variables and other correlations that might reveal such truths as the ‘democratic peace’ or the ‘balance of power’. Such rigid segmentations of the becoming of war can only fail to miss the intensive mechanisms, processes, and routines by which emergent collective violence is summoned, directed, and perpetuated.

Historically, the sub-fields of security and strategic studies have laid a stronger claim to know war. But within those spheres, war is usually subject to a very specific and narrow understanding oriented almost entirely towards instrumental appropriation, generally in service of the state. Within these approaches, warfare is conceived as a resource to be called upon and wielded as per the desiderata of the political. Intellectual labor is accordingly focused on devising the most appropriate and effective uses of armed force for the attainment of political objectives. All but the most sophisticated efforts towards conceptual reflection and generalizable theories take war to be merely derivative of social and political orders, obscuring rather than illuminating the centrality of war to their constitution.

A critical turn in security studies, beginning in the early 1990s, has led to an insistent questioning of the background assumptions guiding traditional approaches. Underlining the value-laden character of security practices, this scholarship (Buzan, Weaver, and De Wilde, 1997) has accompanied the widening of the “security agenda” pursued by policy-makers in the post-Cold War era. Securitization theory, in particular, has drawn attention to the ways in which “referent objects” become the focus of security practices within which the military component

frequently occupies a marginal role. Notwithstanding the valuable insights of critical security studies, it has almost everywhere entailed a corresponding “distancing from ‘the phenomenon of war’” (Barkawi 2011: 703). Methodologically, the privileged conceptual frames of discourse and identity have accounted for the construction of threats and figures of enmity (Odysseos, 2007). But they can say little about the inescapable materiality of war, de facto relegating it to a second order effect of the former. In sum, critical security studies has so decentered war from its preoccupations as to become virtually silent about it.³

The recent emergence of a field of “critical military studies” represents a significant attempt to address this lacuna and has opened up a much needed space of enquiry. Yet we cannot help but express reservations about the way in which “militarization” and “militarism” serve as master concepts within this field.⁴ Although at the outset this turn called for “conceptions of military power, militarism, and militarization [to be] open to critique and reimagining” (Basham et al, 2015: 2), in practice they have rarely been submitted to sustained critical scrutiny. Most commonly they are resorted to as catch-all labels for the alleged influence of “the military” on society. We contend that these concepts are inherently vitiated and fundamentally obstruct the kind of engagement we call for. As Alison Howell has argued (2018: 4), the problem with the concept of militarization is that it presupposes the existence of a pre-militarized order and “drastically underestimates the extent to which warfare and military strategy are intrinsic to ‘political’ or even ‘social’ relations.” Moreover, in wedding itself ontologically to the study of the “military”, critical military studies forecloses enquiry into the wider, unbounded domain of the “martial” other than through a sterile, rote invocation of militarization that only serves to reify the putatively discrete spheres of the military and civilian.

We also detect in critical enquiry a prevalent normative queasiness that sees scholars only too eager to hold war at arm’s length for fear of compromise or complicity with its workings. Any semblance of sympathy, fascination, or even aloofness must be unambiguously renounced in fear that even critical scholars might normalize (or even valorize) the intolerable. Too often, this orients the investigation in ways that ensure predetermined normative positions about the evils of war or the noxiousness of military institutions can be loudly reaffirmed at the cost of further exploration. Although we do not object to principled positions in themselves, we feel

³ Notable exceptions include Shapiro (1997) and Der Derian (2009)

⁴ From 2015 to mid-2019, 78 articles published in *Critical Military Studies* refer to “militarization,” with an equal number invoking “militarism.”

their habitual foregrounding has overdetermined much of the critical investigation of war, leaving many of its facets under-researched. Most consequentially perhaps, the reticence to encounter war on its own terms, as a mode of thinking and a form of life, potentially forecloses the acquisition of new knowledges and dispositions by which to wrest agency over martial phenomena.

Altogether, too little is said within all the aforementioned approaches about how war *becomes*: What are the various bodies, objects, ideas, practices, and affects that assemble to constitute collective violence? How do they come together and cohere as conduits of lethal combat? What are the particular processes, operations, and protocols by which the emergent capacity for war coalesces, unfolds, and dissipates? A martial empiricism pursues all of these questions by allowing the complex terrains of war to provoke their own unique theoretical, even metaphysical, inquiries, rather than mining them for examples to fit existing philosophical predispositions.

Approaches consonant with this agenda can be found within a disparate body of literature, old and new. It covers such areas of enquiry as science and technology (DeLanda, 1991; Mackenzie, 1993; Bousquet, 2009, 2018; MacLeish, 2012; Grove, 2016; Shah, 2017), training and combat (McNeill, 1995; King, 2013; Protevi, 2013; Barkawi, 2017), experience and embodiment (Blackmore, 2005; Sylvester, 2013; McSorley 2015; Lisle 2016, Malešević 2019), perception and sensation (Virilio, 2009; Goodman, 2010; Pettegrew, 2015), or architecture and landscape (Hirst, 2005; Weizman, 2007; Rakoczy, 2008; Gordillo, 2014). Conceptually and methodologically pluralist in outlook, this scholarship draws attention to the configurations of people, things, and processes that come together to make war possible and shape its mutable characteristics. Yet this body of work remains distributed across intellectual traditions and disciplinary confines, and has only begun chipping at the deep-rooted inscription of organized violence across the globe. Martial empiricism aspires to contribute a home for future investigations, cutting across disciplinary boundaries and other scholarly parochialisms.

Martial Empiricism as Radical Empiricism

Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle.

- William James

Martial empiricism apprehends war as a process of becoming suspended between potentiality and actuality, scrutinizing the enfolding of intensities, relations, and attributes that give rise to war's givenness. For war's ontogenetic powers see it persist across multiple histories and geographies while simultaneously always being recast.⁵ Although a processualist philosophy expects the sum of reality to be engaged in such becoming, war's peculiar qualities undoubtedly express its wildest and most disruptive tendencies. War's irruptive possibility has in its various iterations unleashed the most intensive periods of invention and transformation, tearing through carefully erected human orders, shattering sacred idols, and shredding cultural pretensions. War reminds us how little control we really have, how easy it is to be swallowed whole and forgotten in an instant. War forces a confrontation with how precarious, finite, and insignificant each of us is as a solitary, fleeting line of becoming.

Through martial empiricism, we choose fidelity to the world and its encounter over fidelity to a method or the comforting illusion that the world is reliably mechanical, discretely rational, and providentially progressive. Martial empiricism is an empiricism built to embrace the generative, mutating, and world-ending character of war. It belongs to what the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014: 105) calls "untamed thought" in which "knowing is no longer a way of representing the unknown but of interacting with it."⁶ A radical empiricism affirms the world as it is, not as we wish it were. This is the empiricism that war demands; an empiricism both open-ended and robust enough to bear the generative chaos of battle and the ever-extending tendrils of its other-than-combat activities.

⁵ Bartelson (2017) has recently examined the role that the notion of "ontogenetic war" has played in the justification of armed force as a source of political order and its corresponding persistence as a political instrument within international relations. Bartelson is ultimately critical of ontogenesis, seeking to deconstruct its association with war so as to find a way to restrain and even bring an end to mass violence. We find value in this work for its careful attention to the modern discourses and practices through which war has been imagined as a generative force in the world. However, from the perspective of martial empiricism, the *problem* of ontogenesis (Simondon, 2009) demands an exploration of the persistence of war not simply as a morally and politically charged human invention but as an ecology in which the tenacity of war is underpinned by a web of relations binding a medley of bodies, objects, ideas, practices and affects together (see Bousquet, 2019).

⁶ Or, as William James puts it (1976: 4), if we start from the perspective that the event of "pure experience" is primary, "then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its 'terms' becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known."

Martial empiricism permits war to define itself rather than attempt to narrowly circumscribe it in service of prior positivist or normative commitments. *Contra* attempts to compartmentalize reality with unyielding definitions of the object of study, we expect such definitions to become ever less useful as they become more specific. The more assured we are that we know what war is, that we know in advance what to measure, that those units of measurement are isomorphic with each other, the more it will slip between our fingers. The more confident we are in what to look for, the less we are capable of experiencing. There is no better example of this than the insistence by Steven Pinker (2011) or Joshua Goldstein (2012) that war is coming to an end, brandishing spreadsheets that purport to show the statistical decline of armed conflict. Yet what sense is there in conducting a large-*n* study when every war is its own *n*? To our mind, what is waning is less the occurrence of war than the capacity of “war accountants” to encounter the world. The normative injunction to only study war through the frame of a problem that has its unique solution peace is no less limiting. How can such a commitment not obscure what can be known of war? While we are interested in becomings that are otherwise than war, we do not think we should conduct research in a padded room. The provocation of war’s creativity – its more-than-human persistence, its continuities and discontinuities – demands theorizing even if those lines of thought do not have happy endings.

In our formulation of martial empiricism, we draw inspiration from the “radical empiricism” of William James, as well the successive inheritors such as Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, Isabelle Stengers (2010), Gilbert Simondon (2009), Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014), Jane Bennett (2001), William Connolly (2005), Karen Barad (2007), or Steven Shaviro (2014). Writing in the early 1900s, James (1976, 1996) outlined a philosophy decisively grounded in the fecund event of experience. It is essential to understand that James does not propose anything like a phenomenological reduction on the basis of a stable subject of experience but instead affirms experience itself as prior to both its subjects and objects. In Massumi’s words (2016: 2), “pure experience is worlding. It is the constitutive process of the world’s emergence.” James took issue with the rationalist philosophy of his day, charging it with a fixation on universals and a privileging of wholes understood as prior to their parts. His, in contrast, was to be “a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts” that “starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order” (James 1976: 22). This approach is an inherently processual one in which “what really exists is not things made, but things in the making” (James 1996: 117). Radical empiricism does not therefore produce an ontology in the

sense of a hierarchy of being for the organization of reality. As Didier Debaise puts it (2005: 104), “everything is taken on the same plane: ideas, propositions, impressions, things, individuals, societies. Experience is this diffuse, tangled ensemble of things, movements, becomings, relations, without primary distinction, without founding principle.”

From the theoretical ground demarcated thus far, three principles of a martial empiricism should be highlighted. First, martial empiricism is interested in a world that appears as “a fabric of interlaced, superimposed relations, of telescoped events” (Lapoujade, 2000: 193). While a pragmatic bounding of experience may be necessary, nothing can be excluded a priori, no matter how morally repugnant or seemingly banal, if we are to account for war’s promiscuity. Second, war, like experience, is replete with dualisms that have to be attended to as provocations but not accepted as natural divisions. One such instance concerns the articulation between the supposed constancy of the general concept of war and the perpetual mutations in its manifestations as warfare. In reality, war is both a thing and a process, a unity and an assembly, an event and an ecology of relations (Grove, 2014). War’s relations do not only bind parts into wholes at the service of structural functionalities, they also constitute multiplicities of difference whose elements are contingently assembled but possess no less integrity for it. Third, every investigation of war explores a different field of experience that requires a bespoke attention and theoretical development native to that field. No conceptualization is ever exhaustive of reality, it is only ever partial and contextual. Martial empiricism is not a theory of war, it is a theory of the conditions of possibility for asking what war does and means in the first place.

Positing becoming over being, we necessarily privilege novelty and difference over stability and recurrence, with the former having to explain the latter rather than the reverse. We also prioritize relations over dualisms since the world of becoming is no more split between ideas and matter than subjects and objects or structure and agency. Everything is a transaction between the organizational character of a particular arrangement of things and the ways those things make sense of the world through that organizational character. We are all singular blocks of becoming that are simultaneously imbricated in each other. Similarly, we value process over causality. The investigation of continuities in a world of becoming suggests that any causal explanation only appears as such through a decontextualization of the transactional processes that support it.

Radical empiricism and processual ontology implies that there is no rational base camp from which to set off in the study of a process – all research is necessarily *in media res*. One always begins “in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 25). We are always in the middle of war, in a world already saturated with the history, present, and anticipation of war. This is not to say that its manifestations, intensities, and destructions are evenly distributed. Yet no war emerges without the conspiracy of the cosmos. The explicit and visible character of that complicity moves each day from the abstract metaphysical to the concrete actual as war draws into its gravitational pull polities, economies, technologies, and ideologies. There is no end to war’s metabolic appetite and what it does not devour and incorporate, it creates new from whole cloth.

But where do you start investigating something with no outside, no beginning or end, no enduring substance? How do you know what to look for in the first place if the world is a non-repeating flux? One must necessarily hold a provisional idea of what war is in order to begin enquiring into it. But that idea must remain fuzzy enough to accommodate the novelty and mutability inherent to its becoming – an “an exact yet rigorous” conception in Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation (1987: 407). Likewise, the more specific processual sketches to be outlined within the empirical field of war can be thought of as renderings of what Whitehead calls “lures” (1978: 86). In complexity science, these lures are the strange attractors that draw dynamic systems to certain recursive yet never identical patterns of behavior, from atmospheric flows to crowd movements. Crucially, Whitehead’s lures are emphatically not Platonic ideals imperfectly instantiated in the world but refer instead to “potentials for the process of becoming” from which concrete things or events emerge (29).

The contributions to this Special Issue each stake their own claims and investigative terrains through their attentiveness to how war engenders martial life and demands new modes of empiricism equal to it. Rather than summarizing each of the pieces, we outline below the distinct yet overlapping domains of war’s becoming that coalesce through their collective resonance. With the ultimate aim of orienting future research, we identify the intensive processes of war encapsulated by mobilization, design, and encounter.

Mobilizing War

A term that first entered military parlance in the 1830s, *mobilization* denotes the ways in which resources are conscripted, regimented, and deployed into martial worlds. Through this becoming-*mobile*, prior attachments are cast off, life-forms are refashioned and rearranged, wild energies are stoked, amassed, and directed. The particular affinity of war with speed has of course been noted (Virilio, 2006). But it would be a mistake to focus only on the obvious weapon systems or even the accompanying rhythms of production, communication, and exchange. Different velocities are also involved in both the galvanizing of affects – glory, honor, animosity, all the passions without which Clausewitz admitted war would be impossible – and the new cadences of becoming that transport beings in war.

While mobilization is inherent to every war, a broad historical intensification and deepening of its processes has been a salient feature of modern societies. The German veteran Ernst Jünger was probably the first to fully conceptualize mobilization when he wrote in the 1930s of the “growing conversion of life into energy, the increasingly fleeting content of all binding ties in deference to mobility”, anticipating a state of total mobilization in which “there is no longer any movement whatsoever – be it that of the homemaker at her sewing machine – without at least indirect use for the battlefield” (Jünger, 1992: 126).⁷ As historical sociologists have amply demonstrated, the unfolding of world history in the past five hundred years is unintelligible without reference to the tremendous development of the means of destruction that came to nest within the nation-state and attained a new escape velocity in 1914 (Tilly, 1990; Mann, 1986, 1993). Through bouts of intense competition, states placed their entire populations in the service of the arms, invoking homeland, virtue, or historical destiny and summoning figures of absolute enmity so as to corral the energies that might deliver a decisive blow to the adversary. Placing war in the twentieth century under the sign of “work”, the instrumental rationalization of life, relentless optimization, and the central role of technique, Jünger diverged above all from Karl Marx in that he did not see capital accumulation as the mainspring of modern societies but instead a more fundamental drive for power that found its purest expression in the warring activity.⁸ Although his elevation of war into a redemptive metaphysics outlines a black hole that a martial empiricism should always guard against, Jünger’s interventions do emphasize the difficulties that war has always presented to an orthodox Marxism that would resort to a crude economism to account for it. Other thinkers have produced “general

⁷ See Bousquet (2016) for a fuller assessment of Jünger’s thinking on war.

⁸ Writing in 1932 with Soviet Union in mind, Jünger insists that “socialism achieves a work of mobilization no dictatorship would ever dare dream of” (2017: 158).

economies” of war in Georges Bataille (1988), J.F.C. Fuller (1998), or Deleuze and Guattari (1987) that attend to a wider field of investments, exchanges, and expenditures and should accordingly retain our attention (see Meiches on Bataille, this issue). Just as the study of war cannot be bracketed to its narrow instrumentalist framing, a lucid understanding of human societies cannot treat war as merely a peripheral or derivative phenomenon.⁹

Moreover, it would be misguided to believe ourselves beyond the era of total mobilization. Entire nations may no longer face the likely prospect of being in arms strictly speaking but the annihilatory powers amassed by them still indefinitely hang over us in the guise of a thermonuclear sword of Damocles. States of war and peace, civilian and military spheres, blur ever more in the unrelenting age of globalized targeting, counter-insurgency, criss-crossing circuits of innovation from MIT to Silicon Valley to DARPA, and intensifying societal securitization to which we affixed the now almost quaint denomination of “war on terror.” As for the key mobilizing activity of logistics so central to the global capitalist economy, it not only originates in the conduct of warfare (Cowen, 2014) but is now so prominent within it that Paul Virilio affirms (2008: 103), somewhat hyperbolically, that it has “become the whole of war.”

We thus take one of the tasks of martial empiricism to be an investigation into the historical escalation and proliferation of mobilization: a tracing of the ebbs and flows of its extensions and intensities in the countless fields it has invested, from its overarching frames of intelligibility down to the minutiae of its micropolitical practices (Oberg, this issue). The particular marshalling of the human body, in its somatic, cognitive, and affective capacities, is here paramount. Be it via the psychomotricity of the musculoskeletal frame and its nervous system of reflexes, perceptual and neurocognitive faculties, or the affective states of anger, fear, and communal bonding, the human organism has been comprehensively enlisted into the war machine (McSorley, this issue). The age-old conduct of military training for instilling discipline and esprit de corps in the new recruit is certainly paradigmatic, with drill exercises persisting today as a chief ritual through which individuals are integrated into the ranks of military organizations (Foucault, 1995; McNeill, 1995). Yet if repetitive drill and docile obedience to hierarchical command remain valued, late modern military institutions with

⁹ For a sophisticated Marxist analysis that endeavors to think war and capital on an equal footing, see Alliez and Lazzarato (2016)

organizational cultures converging upon their civilian counterparts are also today less prone to rely on nakedly authoritarian means to ensure individual compliance and dependability (Moskos & al, 1999; Howell, 2015).

The “anatomy-politics of the human body” have deepened considerably since their incipience in the disciplinary techniques of the seventeenth century (Foucault, 1990: 139). The capillary microphysics of military power extend themselves ever further through the fields of biochemistry, neuropsychology, pharmacology, and genetics (Coker, 2013, Krishnan, 2016). Military weaponry and equipment are no less important in soliciting, orienting, and steering the human agent, their design guided by principles of “human systems integration” into the war machine (Pew and Mavor, 2007). The methods employed for the purpose of mobilization vary but their core objective remains constant: to augment the individual’s contribution to assembled combat power and ward off the thresholds beyond which the compound effects of stress, pain, and fatigue induce its degradation and eventual collapse (Kinsella, this issue). Indeed, among all the spheres of human activity, it is plausibly within that of armed conflict that the previously established limits of the body are most persistently and spectacularly breached. Borrowing the Spinozist cry vocalized by Gilles Deleuze, we can exclaim: “we do not even know what a martial body can do!” (1988: 17).

None of the above should imply an overly restrictive or monolithic conception of mobilization. For one, the purview of mobilization is evidently not restricted to the statist institutions that have otherwise advanced its techniques to their highest point. It encompasses, for instance, the combustive chain reaction of (self-)radicalization undergone by jihadis or white nationalists in their becoming-war, along with the specific roles played by ideological conversion, catalytic peer groups, paramilitary training, and the administration of steroids or amphetamines. Informal banking networks and Internet crowdfunding platforms likewise support modes of martial patronage, incitement, and entrepreneurialism that bypass the state form (Grove, 2019). No less important are the oppositions, subversions, and surfeits that the solicitations of the war machine encounter everywhere. We find among these open resistances to the headlong rush to war as well as small, concealed, and repeated acts of disobedience and denial. Conversely, there is the fierce indocility of the very energies stoked by mobilization, which are by their very nature uncompliant in their expressions. For war is a domain of transgression and excess that never fully reconciles with the governmental imperatives of utility, calculus, and restraint (Meiches, this issue). Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 358) thus invoke the “fundamental

indiscipline of the warrior” waging a struggle against the forces that would pare them down to an instrumental function. The study of mobilization must therefore also include all that resists, disobeys, and exceeds its injunctions (Lisle, this issue). Finally, as MacLeish (this issue) so poignantly reminds us, processes of demobilization and the smouldering remainders and abominable residues left in the aftermath of war are no less worthy of our consideration.

Designing War

If mobilization addresses the marshalling of resources – bodies, affects, and materiel – towards violent ends, we propose *design* as the frame by which to investigate the concretization of war’s means – or what is generally referred to as *warfare*. Given its realization in destructive techniques and tools for the purpose of obliterating life and the will to resist with maximum efficiency, the philosophical shadow cast over the activity of design renders it a particularly apposite concept. Indeed, as Singleton (2011) shows, design has always been associated with deviousness and duplicity, a realm of schemes, plots, and contrivances where *craft* is synonymous with *craftiness*. Recovering the specific “cunning intelligence” known to the ancient Greeks as *metis*, Detienne and Vernant (1991: 47) highlight those “activities in which man [*sic*] must learn to manipulate hostile forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves.” Alongside the machinations against nature that “give craftsmen their control over material which is always more or less intractable to their designs”, they identify “the stratagems used by the warrior the success of whose attack hinges on surprise, trickery or ambush” (47-48). Characterized by remarkable, wicked feats of technical and tactical ingenuity and decisively shaped by existential confrontation with an enemy that must be outwitted – if necessary by means of trickery and deception – war is arguably the field of human activity that most accords with the conspiratorial spirit of design.

This provocation of “war by design” is inspired by Simone Weil’s insistence (1987: 241) that “the most defective method possible” for apprehending war is “in terms of the ends pursued, and not by the nature of the means employed.” Armed conflicts cannot be reduced to the political motivations or moral justifications that legitimate them. Ends are pursued with specific means, generating war as a particular kind of force. Little therefore can be gleaned or done about war without “having first of all taken apart the mechanism of the military struggle” (1987: 241). Grégoire Chamayou (2015) accordingly calls for “political technicians” to

uncover and expose war's core operations in all their intelligibility and compulsion. Indeed, in grasping the functioning of an actual device, the technical study of war can "discover the implications of how it works for the action that it implements" (15). Attention is thereby directed towards war's mechanisms and the apparatuses through which warfare is assembled and executed.

Design implies a remit much broader than the obvious instruments of warfare, such as weapons or other such material objects inserted in the wider machinations of war. Nor can the investigation of design be confined to that conducted within formal military institutions or even their immediate industrial and R&D complexes, particularly in an age of proliferating "dual-use" technologies, artisanal IEDs, 3D-printed firearms, dark-web supply chains, cyberhacking, and paramilitary swarm tactics. Rather, a focus on the instrumentality of warfare should be broadened to "the ways in which the art of war – its tools, its tactics and its tenor – is generated and governed" (Shah, 2017: 90). To this end, design allows war to be "glimpsed in action" (Singleton, 2011: 5) in the concatenation of actors, objects, and operations that are not just implicated in but generative of a "savage ecology" (Grove, 2019). A focus on design pries open the concrete activities of organized violence, revealing how they cohere and combine to make certain forms of war possible or impossible. Attention is brought to contours (the spaces and objects that delineate the stage within which war is set) and repertoires (the registers of permissible actions that can be performed), attending to how form and function are implied in one another in *schemes*, *signatures*, and *subterfuges*.

At a first pass, the *schemes* of war can be recognized within the tactical directives, operational procedures, and strategic maneuvers that animate military organizations and are subject to continuous reflexive exercises.¹⁰ More fundamentally still, schemes can be thought of as *schematics*, diagrams of operation through which bodies, implements, and terrains are arranged into apparatuses of war. While all these various elements may not have been designed from the outset to serve war, as they fall within its ambit they acquire new martial functions, all the while exerting their own respective influences on the resulting ensembles. One can evoke here

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that a self-styled "military design" movement has been gaining ground within Western militaries over the past decade, exerting a growing influence in debates on command and planning methodologies. Its proponents promote a "critical military epistemology" and "reflective practice" that purport to disrupt and subvert established positivist problem-solving approaches to military planning (Paparone, 2017; Zweibelson, 2017). Whatever "post-positivist" or other "critical" scholars make of this appropriation, we submit that the service ought to be returned by them and greater attention paid to the forms of knowledge produced within military institutions. See also Beaulieu-Brossard (2020) and Öberg (2018).

the human-spear-shield assemblage of the Nguni warrior, the human-stirrup-horse of cavalry, or the human-radio-rifle of the modern platoon, and their various tactical deployments (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Protevi, 2013). Denman (this issue) addresses the architectural topographies of war, a history encompassing rudimentary earthworks, Vauban's geometric fortifications, and today's wider enlistment of the built environment, all of which exist in relation to topologies of terrain and territory (see also Hirst, 2005; Weizman, 2007; Elden 2013; Scott, 2016). As diagrams of power (Deleuze 1986), *schemes* should not be viewed in terms of mere technical exercises, as their own designers are frequently prone to, but as micropolitical activities through which forms of warfare are summoned, conducted, reproduced, and even anticipated (Oberg, this issue).

Every war has its *signature* features. These range from the fashioned characteristics of its infrastructure, weaponry, and soldiers to the more emergent traits of its collisions, injuries, and devastations. All are subject to attempts at *calibrating* them, with the resulting expressions of armed conflict the product of intentional design's encounter with both willful resistance and recalcitrant reality.¹¹ At stake is not merely the optimal allocation of limited resources towards instrumental ends but also the legitimation of the act of killing through conformity with established norms or laws. A firearm must efficiently convert a thermodynamic explosion into directed lethality, yet it must also not result in injury that is superfluous or unnecessary (Shah, 2017; Ford 2019). The dead body is not just the net outcome of a direct hit, but an ideal, the pursuit of a legitimate kind of killing through the effect of military engineering, scientific experimentation and medical observation under legal and moral judgement. Attending to such details as the caliber of bullets is thus not a way of sanitizing the study of war from its deadly effects but on the contrary a means to understanding how those effects are "standardized" within the military repertoire (Dittmer, 2017). More broadly, standardization alludes to the broader role of protocol in warfare, ranging from seemingly mundane quotidian routines or sartorial requirements to the standard operating procedures by which lethal violence is executed (Monk, this issue). In each of these instances, specific protocols impart on war particular styles that cannot be apprehended solely by reference to instrumental designs but are also necessarily expressive of a particular aesthetic or ethos (Meiches, 2017).

¹¹ The recurrence and importance of "failure" and "accident" is worth noting here (Virilio 2007, Lisle, this issue, Meiches, this issue).

Finally, war is the realm of *subterfuge*. Returning to the roots of design in deception and trickery, we recall that war is conducted through an encounter with an opposing force that must be anticipated and negated. As Lisle's study of bomb disposal robots illustrates (this issue), advanced militaries are prone to losing sight of this, obsessed with optimizing their own processes and perfecting their technologies, but are invariably reminded of it, not least because it is the principal way by which they are foiled by supposedly inferior adversaries. Throughout the ages, belligerents have devised countless stratagems towards the dissimulation of their presence, movements, and intentions as well as the proactive disinformation and misdirection of their antagonists. The particular instantiations of these can be found in the various techniques of camouflage, stealth, disguise, decoy, and deception that populate the history of war (Bousquet, 2018). The more general figure here is that of the *trap*, laid to lure the target by exploiting its habits and proclivities so as to ensnare it in a situation in which its strengths can be offset or even turned against itself. Chamayou (2012) has coined the term of "cynegetics" to denote the kinship between war and hunting – the predatory character of power counterposed to the commonly inherited image of pastoral care under biopolitics. War is a *hunt*, the pursuit of another that can hunt you back. Last but not least, with etymological roots in the Latin for "flight", *subterfuge* also hints at the elusive becoming of war that no snare can ever wholly capture, however carefully designed.

Encountering War

Through the mobilizations and designs of armed force, martial empiricism leads us ultimately to the encounter with war, understood at its paroxysm as the fulminant meeting of hostile forces and searing immersion into its experiential crucible. The forces of becoming are at their most unbridled here in their forbidding convulsions of intertwined destruction and creation. Events are permeated with contingency and unpredictability, or that which Clausewitz referred to as the ineradicable element of "chance" in war. At ground level, the encounter with war directs us to its very sensate experience. After all, war is equally waged *by* the senses (the weapon as extension of the eye), *through* the senses (its surfeit of sensations ranging from excruciating pain to sublime exaltation), and *on* the senses (the blinding, bewildering, and enervation of perception).

We take inspiration from Michel Serres (2016) who opens his book on the senses with a recollection of his time in the French Navy. Through extensive fire training on his ship, he learns to breathe in smoky rooms, crawl through cramped, dark, crowded tunnels, and navigate his surroundings using only his sense of touch. Yet all of this knowledge remains “academic” until the moment an actual fire declares itself in the vessel’s hull. Upon hearing the munitions on the ship detonate, he realizes his only chance for survival is to push through a small, rusty porthole. The moment of theoretical illumination comes as he finds himself stuck in the porthole. Staring out at a glacial sea with his back exposed to the searing flames, one half of his body is freezing while the other is burning. Serres writes “I was inside, I was outside. Who was this ‘I’?”. In that instant, the ‘I’ became a body that “proclaims, calls, announces, sometimes howls the I like a wounded animal” (19). In that moment of desperation, the body fissures, another “I” emerges, not the “I” of the cogito but that of pure experience. The confrontation with existential peril is for Serres not just one more experience among others collected and indexed by a persistent “I” but one that forges an altogether new “I” from within it. The subject revealed during those fateful minutes resonates with James’s counter-intuitive claim that we are, in each fleeting moment, nothing more than a bundle of experience in the flux of becoming. In the moment of pain and crisis, the disjunctive character of Serres’s legs, arms, torso, head, and sensations dismembers Kant’s supposed “spontaneous accord of the faculties.” What Serres learnt that day is that there is nothing spontaneous or necessary about the habituated accord of the faculties. The faculties and our sense of self are, like everything else, transitory coalescences drawn from the stream of experience.

Cardinal as it may be, the encounter with war does not reduce to the conflagration of battle but encompasses a multiplicity of locales, durations, and affects. War is diversely experienced by its participants as a cacophony of fear, anxiety, love, grief, rage, boredom, reminiscence, longing, and elation to which sleep offers merely a temporary respite (Kinsella, this issue). Many soldiers describe missing war and its unparalleled heightening of human existence but all wrestle with its fundamental unintelligibility and foreignness, one way or another. In Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* from the Vietnam War (1991), war appears as a kind of collective insanity in which soldiers struggle to make sense of the absurd situations the designs of war have placed them in. William Spanos (1993) notes that the entire Vietnamese earth came to be experienced as hostile by U.S. soldiers. These soldiers could *feel* the enmity of trees, mosquitos, humidity, shadows, and small children. What is it to *feel* enmity as opposed to merely acquiescing to its legal declaration or semiotic identification by official uniforms? The realm

of feeling in war in all its complexities and gradations is one that has still received insufficient attention in our disciplines.

The study of war experience goes well beyond collecting and relaying the combat testimonies or personal narratives of participants, however. Navigating the field of martial experience demands close attention to the depersonalizing shock of pure experience, the complex interactions between various affects, and the modes of intelligibility that attempt to make sense of and commandeer those affects. Through his enquiry into affective excess in total war, Ben Anderson enjoins us to move beyond an amorphous general category of affect to understanding how specific affects are “imbricated with mutable and variable modes of power that differ in their targets, desired and actual outcomes, hinges, and spatial forms” (Gregg and Seigsworth, 2009: 168). Attending to the sensory and affective dimensions of war requires inspecting both the battlescapes in which combat occurs and all the other spaces in which bodies are primed and conditioned for fighting in the first place. Kinsella’s contribution (this issue) on the regulation of sleep at war and the successes and failures of military interventions in the governance of slumber is exemplary. To consider sleep or its privation as part of the formative milieu of war draws us to the rhythms and processes of the body that both set the stage for martial experience and themselves constitute sites of power and contestation. In turn, Kirby’s unsettling investigation into sexual violence (this issue) troubles our understandings of corporeal investments and mobilizations in the most intimate and traumatic of encounters.

The supple affective terrain of experience certainly has not escaped the cunning intelligence of war. Tactics of “shock and awe” and campaigns to “win hearts and minds” seek to modulate the experience of war to produce specific outcomes. Bombs and bullets are made to persuade, convert, and inspire as much as to kill and destroy. Peter Sloterdijk (2009) refers to the invasive ecology of warfare – the targeting of the material and immaterial connective tissues of our life-worlds – as “atmoterrorism.” The progress of war is from this perspective nothing less than the ceaseless search for “new surfaces of vulnerability” (2009: 28), from breathable air and drinking water to ideological beliefs and psychological states. For Massumi (2015), color-coded terror levels, mutual assured destruction, and IEDs all trade on the volatile stock market of affective intensities that are no less real for their ethereal character. Atmospheres of war that extend far beyond the identifiable physicality of conflict are always enveloping us. By virtue of violence’s “super-empirical” character – its immaterial affective charge – a witness can be “struck by the performed remainder of force as certainly as the recipient of the blow”

(Massumi, 2015: 87). Violence does not reduce to the infliction of broken bodies and bleeding wounds. War cuts deeper.

It is through the affective register that scholars like McSorley (2012) or Daggett (2015) are able to convey the militarized sensorium of helmetcams or the queering embodiments of drone interfaces. Gun sights, night vision goggles, and drone cameras are not so much perceptual extensions to pre-existing subjects than interpolations into the flux of deterritorialized affect from which martial subjectivities emerge. From such points of entry, the primary stuff of war increasingly appears less like an assortment of weapons, drilled bodies, and formations than, as per McSorley's olfactory exploration (this issue), a synesthetic congerie of visions, sounds, smells, touches, memories, and emotions. The question here is not so much how to make sense of war as how war makes the senses.

In accordance, the apprehension of war's encounter cannot limit itself to an interpretation of its representations. Through MacLeish's engagement with the veteran life (this issue), we learn that experience exceeds the immediately physical and yet retains a real effectivity on the world over and above the meanings invested in its representations. Even if they cannot be discerned in the discrete, continuous space of the material world, affective intensities overflow any representation we can make of them. The capture of the flux of experience through the media of language, paper, film, museums, and monuments has no privilege over scar tissue, synaptic patterns, social relations, and the planet's epidermis. Martial empiricism is no more a naive realism in which everything is directly observable and measurable than it is an endless hermeneutics through which the world is made subservient to our interpretations of it.

In war, through war, beyond war, the tumult of conflict periodically unsettles and shatters the reality principle of our understandings. Rather than call the participants of war that undergo such journeys "unreliable" witnesses or "unstable" subjects, we would rather redirect these seismic shifts in perspective onto the myth of recurrent experience. While not its sole privilege, war surely presents an inordinate challenge to the normalization of first world, suburban, sheltered experience in which repetition and sameness are mistaken for a given principle or norm of both daily existence and scholarly investigation rather than the prerogative of particular dwellings. Yet we have now become painfully aware that city centers and public transportation are everywhere liable to precipitously transmute into sites of carnage, striking at beings in their most quotidian existences. Concurrently, drone pilots in the heart of the Nevada

suburbs commute home through rows of box stores, returning to their families after putting in a shift hunting men across the rocky terrains of Waziristan. The humdrum domesticity of the everyday coexists with the systemic unleashing of deadly force. Rather than pick a side between thinkers like Veena Das (2007) who underlines the ordinariness of violence and Adriana Cavarero's demand (2009) that we confront the "horrorism" of our contemporary atrocities, we position martial empiricism in the interval between the normality and pathology of war. Following this lead highlights how war choreographs the transitions from one field of consistent experience to another, and how the accompanying disruptions congeal into new consistencies. How else can we make sense of the forever and everywhere wars of the twenty-first century (Filkins, 2009; Gregory, 2011) and the lacerations of remote force projection and pop-up guerrilla that punctually erupt across the globe?

An empirical account of war organized by sensuous experience leads us back to the "great outdoors" of Levinas's opening provocation – war at the crossroads of totality and boundless alterity. However, the other of war, *contra* Levinas, is not just the problem of other human minds. Consciousness indeterminably bleeds into other forms-of-life, distributed amongst animals and machines – the horses, dogs, pigeons, or dolphins of war, their biomimetic counterparts and other algorithmic presences (Cudworth and Hobden, 2015). We already have phenomenological accounts surveying the *umwelts* of drone operators and their targets (Holmqvist, 2013; Daggett 2015). New frontiers lie beyond in the burgeoning inner lives of our machines and their otherworldly experiences of us. Grounding our study in a speculative and radical account of experience entails an openness to varieties of martial experience that outstrip our imaginations or predictions. War continually struggles to become conscious of itself.

If unbridled deregulation of the senses and emergent subjectivities are inherent to war, how are we to realize a philosophical engagement with war? It is not enough to say that philosophical thought should interpret or represent war for us. We are not, in the final instance, interested in a theory *of* war but in how war provokes thought itself. For the frame of experience necessarily pushes us deeper into the question of what holds war together. War is no more reducible to the litany of entities that make it up – from bullets, bombs, and bandages to battlefields, bodies, and battalions – than it is to an unmediated exertion of political will. The promiscuous relations of parts to wholes are an essential research problem but their apprehension is inchoate without the stream of consciousness that experiences war. The empiricism pursued here – with its

emphasis on affect, embodiment, and sensation – is a *martial* empiricism because it is forged in the very crucible of war. Rather than being merely the agent provocateur of some other line of thought, war is permitted to be its own site of inquiry and theoretical elaboration.

Conclusion

In this article and accompanying special issue we aim to advance a martial empiricism able to navigate the ferocious mangle of lifeforms and patterns of matter associated with the persistence of armed conflict. War, we contend, is not a phenomenon to be definitively distilled, but a question perpetually posed. To this end, we outline three overlapping investigative terrains that are mobilization, design, and encounter. Over and above any call for a new theory or yet another disciplinary “turn,” we advocate an investment of war’s empirical field through a sustained interrogation of the formal and tacit knowledges, embedded practices, bodies, affects, institutional cultures, technical machines, and mundane objects through which armed conflict is actualized every day. Without disputing or downplaying its abominable destructive consequences, we insist on the inherently generative powers of war – its intimate affinity to the pre-personal flux of becoming – and urge for investigative modes that rise to it.

There will no doubt be those that think such an affirmative approach to the study of war risks the danger of being seduced by war – of becoming war ourselves. Such a concern is not unwarranted in a world saturated with the potential for nuclear warfare today and autonomous, replicating artificial combatants tomorrow. Yet we believe that any thought worth thinking will have its dangers. The gravity of our times requires that we adopt as our first principle not to shy away from war but to encounter it on its own terms. This is not, in our view, synonymous with surrendering to war but merely with meeting the demands of the fraught and indecisive struggle to wrest some agency over it.

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