Is Clausewitz's conception of the relationship between "war" and "politics" useful for understanding warfare post-1990?

The importance of politics in Clausewitz cannot be denied as he himself said that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976: 28). Throughout this essay I will demonstrate that this is not as simple as it seems as I dwell into Clausewitz's theory and his trinity of war. I will argue that his conceptions are useful for understanding war in current times, despite the numerous technological improvements and the proliferation of non-state actors. I will tackle what I consider to be misinterpretations of his work, made by his critics, and I will finish with the application of his trinity to a XXI century conflict.

It is important to start with Clausewitz's own understanding of "war" and "politics" before trying to demonstrate its usefulness today. Clausewitz was very direct in his definition of war. In the first chapter of *On War*, he argues that war is an "act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, 1976: 13) and he goes on to conclude that comes as the result of political activity. War is determined by policy in the sense that it represents a rational use of violence to accomplish a pre-established purpose. As Clausewitz argues, war is a "true political instrument", one that allows policy to reach its desired goal and from which it cannot, therefore, be separated. Policy will not only define the objective military force will strive to achieve but it will also play a role in deciding the means to achieve it. However, to fully understand the importance of politics in Clausewitz, one must look at it through the scope of his trinitarian conception of war: violence, the play of chance and policy.

The first element should not be understood by the actual act of physical violence but the emotions that inevitably fuel the conflict. It is the irrational realm of war, where passion and hostility are called into being and will affect the actions of men during the actual conflict *per se* (Bassford, 2007: 82). The play of chance refers to the odds and probabilities that condition the act of war. These external factors can refer to the actual hardships imposed by the physical

world (geographical or technological conditions, for example) or to the personal characteristics and perceptions of the actors involved (Bassford, 2007: 89).

Having gone through the realms of chance and irrationality we are forced to recognized that war as a phenomenon must have a rational driver as well - "No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it" (Clausewitz, 1976: 223). This rational element is, as we have seen, policy, in the sense that it is "war's subordination to rationality" (Bassford, 2007: 86).

Most of Clausewitz's critics claim that the arguments presented in "On War" are limited because the author was influenced by the time period in which he lived. The idea that war was an extension of politics and, the assumption that only governments are capable of that, is one made by many (Creveld and Keegan, for example). They describe the Clausewitzian trinity as made of people, army and government; and claim that this is only possible within the state framework (Creveld, 1991: 49-50). Continuing this line of thought, Creveld then adds that war has been waged by numerous "entities". In his approach, he concludes that to sum war to a political instrument of the state is unreal because it does not account for a conflict that includes non-state actors. (Creveld, 1991: 52). Creveld goes on to explain, and rightfully so, that most of the wars that we see nowadays are what he calls "low intensity conflicts" and are not between states (Creveld, 1991: 51-60). An argument that one would hardly counter, given that, for example, an organisation such as Al-Qaeda has gained so much prominence in the XXI century. However, having misread Clausewitz, Creveld calls these conflicts "nontrinitarian wars" and claims that they cannot be analysed through the scope of *Vom Kriege*. He fails to understand that the elements of the trinity, that he took so literally (people, army, state), merely served a demonstrative purpose, as they do not appear in the paragraph where the trinity is enumerated (Bassford, 2007: 80).

The issue is again raised in Mary Kaldor's *New & Old Wars*. As Strachan and Rothe sum it up, Kaldor once again falls victim to the same misinterpretation as van Creveld, as she

limits Clausewitz's theory of war as something that can only be applied to inter-state conflict (Strachan et. al., 2007: 9). In her analysis, Kaldor argues that social change, brought on mainly by globalization, has changed the character of war. Globalization, through its growing "interconnectedness", led to the failing of the state, especially in its ability to maintain a monopoly over organized violence. New wars are, therefore, fought mostly by transnational armed groups against each other, or a state, but not between states (Kaldor, 2006: 6). She also adds that the political goals behind these conflicts shift from "politics of ideas" to "politics of identity". Where in the first case, wars were fought behind an integrative project that tried to unite different groups under one common banner, the latter is more exclusive. It is based on a sense of nostalgia for a forgotten past. Identity politics can also draw on insecurity and fear as its weapons, labelling those considered "different" as a threat to the group (Kaldor, 2006: 80-81).

She also adds that the inherent changes in military tactics and the increase in the number of targeted civilians require a new approach. The growing importance of the civilian population suggests indeed a more "absolute" kind of war. However, we are still able to analyse those changes under Clausewitz's theory. The target of civilians can be seen as a strategy of demoralization with the objective of undermining the opponent's resolve (hostility). The support of the civilian population, either financially or morally, is essential to the war effort and has always been so. Such a relationship can also be explained using the above mentioned trinity, as Bassford argues. Clausewitz advocated a relationship between the three elements in his concept (violence, play of chance and policy) but he did not suggest it had to be a balanced one (Bassford, 2007: 80-81). In this case, the growing importance of the population can have, for example, a direct impact on the hostility between actors or it can also damage the credibility of the governing body in charge of the decision process. This does indeed change the approach that has to be made to war, but, however big this impact may be, it does not discredit Clausewitz's trinity. As it has been widely argued, Clausewitz was well

aware that "the people are as central to war as are the government and army" (Strachan, 2007: 194).

Having gone through some of the criticisms made to his theory, I will try to apply Clausewitz's trinity to modern conflict. I draw on a previous analysis made by Antulio Echevarria to apply the concepts to the conflict opposing the United States and Al-Qaeda. The war against Al-Qaeda is also a good example to demonstrate the relevance of Clausewitz's trinity despite the above mentioned changes brought on by the increasing process of globalisation. As Echevarria argues, this change is bringing the different elements of the trinity in a tighter relationship. It is important to recognize that these changes in the subjective character of war (military forces, technology and weapons) have produced alterations in the distribution of the objective aspects (the trinity can be considered as objective in the sense that it is universal to every conflict). However, even if the proportion in which the elements of the trinity are present might be different, the relevance of each remains the same (Echevarria, 2007: 202-203). As I mentioned above, Clausewitz argued for a relationship but not for a balance between the trinity.

Focusing on the war between Al-Qaeda and the United States it is easy to identify hostile emotions on both sides of the conflict. This hostility can be the result of specific events, such as 9/11, in the case of the US, or, in the case of Al-Qaeda, it can stem from "years of real and perceived injustices and repression", due to specific policies adopted towards the Middle East (Echevarria, 2007: 214). This sentiment can be strong enough to drive the people and through them drive their leaders. Al-Qaeda has been able to take advantage of this to gain the support of communities throughout the region. By helping solve socio-economical issues it has managed to fulfil a role neglected by the governing bodies of the region. Through these actions, and sometimes the usage of fear and intimidation, terrorist organisations manage to create powerful links with these communities, which provide them with help and assistance (be it financial or otherwise) vital for their continued survival (Echevarria, 2007: 214-215).

Moving on to the second element of the trinity, the play of chance, one has to recognize the numerous technological evolutions of the last decades. Information technologies have spread worldwide but instead of reducing the fog of war, they have amplified it. The infinite possibilities for deceiving the enemy have multiplied and armed conflict has remained a "matter of assessing probabilities and making judgements" (Echevarria, 2007: 216). The high number of drone attacks in the Middle East, that kill only civilians, or the fact that Osama bin Laden managed to stay hidden for so long are examples of this. A greater access to an increasing number of sources of information makes the role of intelligence, in deciding the right course of action, more important now than ever before. (Echevarria, 2007: 216)

Finishing with the third element of the trinity, it is important to clarify the purposes of both actors in the conflict. According to Al-Qaeda itself, their main objective is to mobilize the Islamic nation and put an end to the United States' influence in the Middle East. They also aim to reform the region according to their interpretation of the Islamic law (Echevarria, 2007: 209). On the other side, the US' objectives are broader and they do not refer to Al-Qaeda exclusively, but to terrorist organisations in general. The United States aim to put an end to terrorist activity and persuade other nations to adopt a similar policy. Culture and ideology are relevant factors in the way each side chooses to wage war but the strategy they pursue is aimed at their objectives. (Echevarria, 2007: 210-213).

I have gone through the relationship between "war" and "politics" in Clausewitz's argument and have demonstrated that the author of *On War* saw the first as an instrument of the second. However, it is important to look at the acts of policy making as something not exclusive to states but something that is also inherent to other non-state actors. This perspective, which I believe to be Clausewitz's own, has been criticised by some authors (such as Creveld and Kaldor) that interpret the trinity of war as composed of people, army, and government or state. As my arguments have shown, this interpretation comes from a misreading of Clausewitz's On War that limits the scope of its analysis. Clausewitz himself was the first to recognize that war had a changing nature, like a "chameleon". In the end,

however, there are some elements that are universal and ever-present, even if in different proportions. The fact is that Clausewitz's theory of war remains a valuable tool to understand war in the XXI century, as it was demonstrated by the application of the trinity to the conflict opposing the United States and Al-Qaeda, a non-state. Despite the technological evolution, as the author mentioned "its grammar may indeed be its own, but not its logic" (Clausewitz, 1976: 252).

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