

How universally applicable is Clausewitz's conception of Trinitarian warfare?

Introduction

To answer the question stated in the heading I will focus in the following on three main criticisms of Clausewitz's conception of Trinitarian warfare. First, due to the increased lethality of modern warfare, especially through nuclear weapons, John Keegan perceives the Western way of warfare no more 'a continuation of politics by other means.'¹ ...'Turned in on itself it brought disaster and threatened catastrophe.'² Second, Martin Van Creveld criticises Clausewitz's worldview to be one that is too limited to his own time, a time when states with their armies were the only entities entitled to wage war for political aims. Today, however, 'the traditional distinction between peoples and armies is being broken down by new, nontrinitarian, forms of war collectively known as Low-Intensity Conflict.'³ Third, Christopher Coker contemplates post-military society in the age of profuse accessibility to information and its implication. Due to the abolishment of compulsory military service in most Western states, 'the relationship between the military, the state and the society ... has once again become contractual as it was in the eighteenth century. And it is this development which marks a decisive break with the trinitarian system.'⁴

However before I turn to the critics of Clausewitz's conception of Trinitarian warfare, we have to glance at the conception itself.

Wondrous Trinity

In the first book, chapter one of 'On War' Carl von Clausewitz concludes that

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon, its dominant tendencies always make war a [wondrous] trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force [*blinder Naturtrieb*]⁵; of the play of [probabilities and chance] within the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.

¹ Keegan (1993), p. 391

² Keegan (1993), p. 391

³ Van Creveld (1991), p. 73

⁴ Coker (2002), p 94

⁵ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second [mehr]⁶ the commander and his army; the third [mehr]⁷ the government. The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends of the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone.

.... These three tendencies are ... deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.⁸

In Clausewitz's eyes, these three tendencies and their interrelation transcend history. Their interrelation may vary over time and from one culture to another but they are still timeless features of war. This notion has been challenged by several critics over time.

Criticism on the conception of Trinitarian warfare

Keegan doubts the usefulness of battles for political aims as experienced in the First and Second World War:

...the experience of violent and sudden death has been brought through battle into many, perhaps a majority of families, that fear of the suffering – arbitrary and accidental as well as deliberate and purposive – battle can cause to human societies is profound and almost universal, and that the usefulness of future battle is widely doubted.⁹

He argues further that untamed, contemporary battles entail such a horrific experience to soldiers that 'as time dragged on, almost all soldiers exposed to continuous or semi-continuous combat broke down.'¹⁰ Additionally, the lethality in battle and the extraordinary sight of mutilation, sufferance, agony, and despair during battle utterly disgust soldiers to such an extent that it dissuades men, 'for a longer or shorter period, from wanting to fight any more.'¹¹

⁶ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

⁷ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

⁸ Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

⁹ Keegan (1991), p. 336

¹⁰ Keegan (1991), p. 328

¹¹ Keegan (1991), p. 335

To prove his point, Keegan discerns 'one warrior culture'¹² which differs itself with a distinct set of values, symbols, and rituals. This warriors live in 'a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it.'¹³ This warrior's world changes over time and adapts in step to the civilian.¹⁴ However, 'the culture of the warrior can never be that of civilisation itself.'¹⁵ Keegan argues further that 'war may be, among many other things, the perpetuation of a culture by its own means.'¹⁶ Thereby, Keegan negates the primacy of politics as a mere temporary phenomenon and believes instead in the primacy of culture¹⁷. Additionally, Keegan sees in regiments - say armed forces - a 'collection of artificially preserved warrior bands.'¹⁸ Keegan states further that the outcome of a rule-bound quarrel between primitive, egalitarian people living in underpopulated country was not slaughter but displacement.¹⁹ Keegan's description of the Zulus implies that mass slaughter in warfare is the result of scarce space and resources in combination with the ambition to impose one's authority – the ambition to rule.²⁰ Keegan rejects the conception of Trinitarian warfare as a theory of timeless validity. Moreover, he denies the usefulness of battle to serve political ends. With the introduction of the concept of 'egalitarian small-group cohesion', he even doubts the commander's capability to determine the outcome of a battle.²¹ He concludes that

The militant young ...will fight for the causes which they profess not through the mechanisms of the state and its armed power, but where necessary, against them, by clandestine and guerrilla methods. It remains for armies to admit that the battles of the future will be fought in never-never land.²²

Van Creveld has a slightly different approach. He argues that Trinitarian warfare is only possible between states because only states can recruit, finance, train, deploy, and sustain modern equipped armed forces. Furthermore, Trinitarian warfare is only possible if both antagonist states are organised in the same Trinitarian manner. The same division of labour between government, armed forces and people must exist on both sides. Van Creveld states furthermore that since 1945 three quarters of armed conflicts have been of so-called "low-intensity" variety involving irregulars such as 'guerrillas, terrorists, and even civilians,

¹² Keegan (1993), p. xvi

¹³ Keegan (1993), p. xvi

¹⁴ Keegan (1993), p. xvi

¹⁵ Keegan (1993), p. xvi

¹⁶ Keegan (1993), p. 46

¹⁷ Keegan (1993), p. 46

¹⁸ Keegan (1993), p. 49

¹⁹ Keegan (1993), p. 29

²⁰ Keegan (1993), p. 28-32

²¹ Keegan (1991), p. 52

²² Keegan (1991), p. 336

including women and children.²³ Van Creveld points out that since 1945 low-intensity conflicts (LIC) brought about significant, political change whereas Trinitarian warfare established mere *status quo ante*.²⁴ States warring against non-Trinitarian entities have a poor record. According to Van Creveld, the armed forces of states are in no way organised, equipped, or trained to counter LIC threats:

The cold, brutal fact is that much present-day military power is simply irrelevant as an instrument for extending or defending political interests over most of the globe; When it comes to preventing acts of terrorism closer to home, the military services and their arms – fighter bombers, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, etc. – are even less useful.²⁵

For Van Creveld it is a plain fact 'that conventional military organizations of the principal powers are hardly even relevant to the predominant form of contemporary war.'²⁶ Due to the brake-down of the traditional distinction between peoples and armies in LIC, and to the success of irregulars in attaining political aims through armed struggle against states, the whole conception of Trinitarian warfare crumbles. Van Creveld sums up that

Clausewitz's ideas on war were wholly rooted in the fact that, ever since 1648, war had been waged overwhelmingly by states. ...these ideas turned out to be even more applicable during the nineteenth century. It was a period when the legal separation between governments, armies, and peoples became, for various reasons, even stricter than before.²⁷

Furthermore, the trinity of government, army, and people is of no great help to 'understand either "uncivilized" war or the great wars of the twentieth century.'²⁸

Coker discerns two main reasons for the waning utility of Trinitarian warfare. The first is the diminishing social function of the military as forger of social cohesion.²⁹ The second is the growing public scrutiny for the way in which armed forces are used. According to Coker 'the military is now expected not only to share the values civil society holds in high esteem, but even in the way it prosecutes war it is expected to reflect civility and compassion – in a word, humanitarianism.'³⁰ The ubiquity of information and free accessibility of information resources through the internet make the spread of knowledge for states difficult to control. Living in a post-traditional society, so says Coker, 'the past has lost its power to determine the present.

²³ Van Creveld (1991), p. 20

²⁴ Van Creveld (1991), p. 21

²⁵ Van Creveld (1991), p. 27

²⁶ Van Creveld (1991), p. 20

²⁷ Van Creveld (1991), p. 41

²⁸ Van Creveld (1991), p. 42

²⁹ Coker (2002), p. 92

³⁰ Coker (2002), p. 99

Instead, the future has taken its place as a determinant of present action.³¹ Furthermore, politics and war are seen as forms of insurance. The growing public awareness of risk questions and politicises previously depoliticised areas of decision-making (such as war) in which the authority of experts was rarely questioned.³² As a consequence, the government's use of its armed forces for political purposes is more restricted than ever before. Coker sees in the above a decisive break with the Trinitarian system.

Is the conception of Trinitarian warfare obsolete?

To evaluate the criticism mentioned above, one has to analyse the conception of Trinitarian warfare. According to Clausewitz, all three tendencies interact but shift in their relationship. Clausewitz formulates a theory of the nature of war in concluding his first chapter with that conception of Trinity. Therefore, his Trinitarian warfare ought to transcend history whereas its three tendencies may shift in their relationship over time and from one culture to another. Explaining the tendencies of war as a Trinity, Clausewitz discerns explicitly three levels of abstraction.

First, war is a human endeavour that involves 'primordial violence, hatred, and enmity.'³³ In war nothing is certain and decisions are made on 'play of probabilities and chance.'³⁴ War is 'an instrument of policy'³⁵ and therefore serves a political purpose.

Second, Clausewitz ascribes the first tendency to blind instinct [*blinder Naturtrieb*]³⁶; the second tendency to the creative spirit [*freie Seelentätigkeit*]³⁷; the third tendency to reason [*blosser Verstand*].³⁸

Third, Clausewitz assigns the people to the first tendency, the military to the second, and the government to the third. However, he explains that the characteristic of one element is not exclusive but all characteristics are to a certain extent inherent in all tendencies, because all elements are composed of human beings.

In describing three interactions that lead war to extremes, Clausewitz implies a fourth level of abstraction: will – means – effort.³⁹

Furthermore, I will introduce a fifth level of abstraction. Trinitarian warfare consists of an element that governs the endeavour by setting aims. In this way, leadership gives purpose

³¹ Coker (2002), p. 101

³² Coker (2002), p. 102

³³ Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

³⁴ Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

³⁵ Clausewitz (1989), p. 89

³⁶ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

³⁷ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

³⁸ Clausewitz (1952), p. 111

³⁹ Clausewitz (1989), p. 75-77

and a sense of direction. In addition, Trinitarian warfare needs somebody who does the actual fighting. Finally, Trinitarian warfare has to be sustained - either financially, or with manpower, or both - by the support of people.

I	primordial violence, hatred, enmity, passion	play of probabilities and chance	political purpose
II	instinct	creative spirit; Military Genius: courage, <i>coup d'oeil</i> , determination, presence of mind, strength of will, strength of mind, imagination	reason
III	people	military	government
IV	will	means	effort
V	supporter	fighter	leadership

Tab. 1. Trinity - five levels of abstraction

It is Clausewitz's third level of abstraction that his critics focus upon without considering the implications of the other levels. The dismantling of the third level, as Van Creveld does, in arguing that governments are no longer the only political entities that are involved in warfare, and that the distinction between regular forces and people in arms blur in a LIC does not, in any way, falsify Clausewitz's conception of Trinitarian warfare. On the contrary, Van Creveld admits political, landslide success in waging LIC against traditional power structures. Despite the asymmetric distribution and deployment of means, non-state actors achieved their political aims in overcoming their opponents through a bigger effort of leadership and the willingness of their people to support and sustain a protracted armed struggle.

Coker explains that through the abolishment of conscription the people of today's information society are detached from the military as it was in the eighteenth century. Coker further says that therefore the Trinitarian system is obsolete. His argument is not very convincing. In Clausewitz' own words:

In the eighteenth century...war was still an affair for governments alone, and the people's role was simply that of an instrument. At the onset of the nineteenth century, peoples themselves were in the scale on either side. The generals opposing Frederick the Great were acting on instructions – which implied that caution was one of their distinguishing characteristics. But now the opponent of the Austrians and Prussians was – to put it bluntly – the God of War himself.⁴⁰

Additionally, Coker himself underlines the growing importance of public scrutiny for legitimate use of armed forces.

⁴⁰ Clausewitz (1989), p. 583

Keegan's criticism of the concept of Trinity is the most elusive one. In denying any use of battles for political purposes in modern conflicts, he denies any reason governing the strategic level of conflict. Furthermore, he completely blots out all those factors in Clausewitz's levels of abstraction that Keegan himself uses for arguing against the utility of battles for political purposes. Keegan denies the fact that since the end of the Second World War, it was not nuclear weapons or great symmetric, conventional battles that accounted for huge losses and unspoken suffering but asymmetric warfare. Warfare has not abolished itself, yet. Obviously, the proliferation of LIC is no proof for the invalidity of Trinitarian warfare. On the contrary, it only emphasises shifting relationships between the three tendencies as argued by Clausewitz. A shift from reason to passion, and primordial violence.

Conclusion

In the end, it does not matter whether warfare is fought accordingly established rules in order to minimise losses, as it is common in intraspecific competition in wildlife, or not as long as the desired end state of conflict is accepted by all sides involved. Whether the applied violence to 'compel our enemy to do our will'⁴¹ is done by the mere display of one's prowess through a display of arms, a duel between two champions, a clash of either regular or irregular armed forces, diplomacy, economic pressure through sanctions or computer-inflicted damages to enemy's information system, or cultural persuasion, it is a choice done at the strategic level. In setting aims, the strategic level gives a sense of direction in war. Thereby, one's action are governed. Obviously, a specific form of warfare is essentially the product of one's history and cultural background. Therefore, it is not surprising that the form of warfare changes over time and from one culture to another. Clausewitz shares this insight in saying that

The semibarbarous Tartars, the republics of antiquity, the feudal lords and trading cities of the Middle Ages, eighteenth-century kings and the rulers and peoples of the nineteenth century – all conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims.⁴²

Human beings are subjected to reason and creativity. However, human beings are to a certain extent instinct driven. Contrary to animals, the instincts of human beings are rudimentary, and therefore human actions are mostly guided by mores and norms. These mores and norms may differ from one culture to another but nevertheless they identify what is right and what is wrong for each culture. Inevitably, the human being exercises free choice.

⁴¹ Clausewitz (1989), p. 75

⁴² Clausewitz (1989), p. 586

Therefore, human beings' action can be characterised as morally good or bad.⁴³

Consequently, one cannot transplant one own given moral standards to another culture without running in danger of utter, mutual misunderstanding.

Colin S. Gray is right in saying that

Warfare varies in scale, weaponry, geographical medium, and measure of symmetry between foes, but it does not vary in intensity from context to context. For people at the sharp end of war, a location that for nuclear combat includes everybody, there is only one level of intensity, the one that threatens life and limb.⁴⁴

Despite Clausewitz's own nineteenth century worldview, his conception of Trinitarian warfare takes into account various levels of abstraction of all three features of every human endeavour - reason, creativity, and instinct. Additionally, Clausewitz implants no moral judgement whatsoever in his conception. Consequently, the conception of Trinitarian warfare transcend time and culture and is therefore universally applicable because warfare is an human endeavour.

⁴³ Vogel (1989), p. 97-101

⁴⁴ Gray (1999), p. 274

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