

# War Without End(s): Grounding the Discourse of 'Global War'

DAVID CHANDLER\*

*Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster, UK*

This article seeks to explain the limits of critical discourses of 'global war' and biopolitical framings of 'global conflict' that have arisen in response to the globalization of security discourses in the post-Cold War era. The central theoretical insight offered is that 'global war' should not be understood in the framework of contested struggles to reproduce and extend the power of regulatory control. 'Global war' appears 'unlimited' and unconstrained precisely because it lacks the instrumental, strategic framework of 'war' understood as a political-military technique. For this reason, critical analytical framings of global conflict, which tend to rely on the 'scaling up' of Michel Foucault's critique of biopolitics and upon Carl Schmitt's critique of universal claims to protect the 'human', elide the specificity of the international today. Today's 'wars of choice', fought under the banner of the 'values' of humanitarian intervention or the 'global war on terror', are distinguished precisely by the fact that they cannot be grasped as strategically framed political conflicts.

**Keywords:** global war • deterritorialized struggle • Carl Schmitt • biopolitics

## Introduction

**I**N THE LAST CENTURY, there were two types of 'global war': those related to the problem of inter-imperialist rivalry – that is, wars between major Western powers – which was commonly understood to underpin the global destruction of the two world wars, and those related to the global conflict of class struggle and the threat of communist revolution, which shaped policymaking in both the domestic and the international arenas. These two global struggles were contained through the framework of the Cold War – with US hegemony forging new frameworks of international institutional management, such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods financial

SECURITY  
DIALOGUE

© 2009 PRIO, [www.prio.no](http://www.prio.no)  
SAGE Publications, <http://sdi.sagepub.com>  
Vol. 40(3): 243–262, DOI: 10.1177/0967010609336204

institutions – and the marginalization of internationalist politics with the various defeats of the Left and the bureaucratization of the Soviet experiment. Today, few commentators would argue that war between the major world powers is a pressing threat. In fact, as the dominant discourses of human security and state failure attest, for most policy advisers it is the threats posed by weak and failing states that top the international policy agenda, not those of strong and well-armed ones. Similarly, few commentators would argue that class struggle and revolutionary or nationalist movements pose a threat to international stability. Nevertheless, global war appears to be back at the forefront of academic and policy thinking.

Even before the ‘global war on terror’, Western constructions of security had begun to frame the security referent (the subject to be secured) and the security threat in global terms. Globalization, complex interdependencies and the assertion of an emerging global consciousness were all held to necessitate a shift from ‘narrow’ state-based constructions of security to globalized frameworks in which ‘universal human rights’ and ‘ethical’ or ‘values-based’ foreign policy interventions increasingly took centre stage. By the end of the 1990s, a new set of policy frameworks already evoked the need for ‘global war’ in order to promote human security approaches, facilitate humanitarian intervention and enforce the doctrine of sovereignty as responsibility. While, for its advocates, global war was posed in terms of global policing or cosmopolitan law enforcement, the globalization of security threats and the need for post-state or post-national responses to them was at the top of the international policy agenda. The post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ has catalysed and cohered the policy frameworks of the globalized security agenda, merging discourses of security and development, on the basis that Western security is at stake, in a multitude of policy interventions in regions previously seen to be of little geostrategic importance.

This article argues that, rather than question the globalization of the security agenda and the inflation of the political stakes in the international sphere, critical theorists have often reinforced this understanding of the globalization of security through taking the political claims of global policymaking and intervention at face value – thereby accepting the logic of these security discourses through suggesting that the political stakes of the international sphere today are at least as much ‘life and death’ as they were in the middle of the last century. The understanding of war – the struggle for geopolitical control – has been extended to comprehend global war as the desire to control and regulate at the global level. In essence, global war is understood as the struggle for securing the reproduction of power, written on a global scale rather than that of the nation-state.

Theorists such as Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (2001, 2006) and Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) have been important in popularizing critical frameworks that assert the radical centrality of global conflict to modern political

life. The power of their work has relied heavily upon their reinterpretations of two earlier theorists: first, Michel Foucault – particularly the reinterpretation of his concept of biopolitics, given additional weight by the recent translation into English of his lectures at the Collège de France in the late 1970s (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008), and its ‘scaling up’ to apply to international relations; second, Carl Schmitt – particularly his critique of universal claims for securing and protecting the human, given additional weight by the publication of the English translation of his classic work on international law, *The Nomos of the Earth* (Schmitt, 2003). Both Foucault and Schmitt problematized liberal frameworks espousing so-called Enlightenment or progressive aspirations – the former from a post-structuralist perspective, seeking to reveal the divisions and hierarchies concealed by them, the latter from a conservative one, arguing that liberal evasions risked undermining stability and preventing the bracketing or limitation of war. The reinterpretation of the work of these historically grounded social theorists has resulted in the formulation of highly abstract critical frameworks analysing Western interventions in terms of instrumentalized visions of all-encompassing global conflict, without territorial or legal bounds (see Chandler, 2008a, 2009b).

The following section outlines the dominant, broadly Foucauldian, frameworks of critique that locate the ‘global war on terror’ and earlier proclamations of human rights intervention as part of a new liberal ‘global war’ to control and regulate the globe, either in the interests of neoliberal capitalism or as the essential workings of global biopolitical governmentality. There then follows a short section on the revival of interest in the work of Carl Schmitt as a way of giving a more grounded framework to abstract perspectives that link ‘global war’ to liberal universalism in unmediated ways. The concluding sections of this article suggest an alternative framework of analysis, capable of understanding ‘global wars’ as a reflection of the lack of political stakes in the international sphere. This is done, first, through a discussion of Schmitt’s analysis of the development of partisan struggles from territorialized, or *telluric*, national struggles to globalized deterritorialized struggles, which lack strategic constraints and cannot be grasped politically. The application of this understanding of global war as disconnected from clear stakes of political contestation is then further developed with regard to both modern terrorism and projections of Western power in abstract frameworks of the ‘war on terror’ and the promotion of liberal values. The article concludes that ‘global war’ can be better understood in relation to the lack of stakes in the international sphere, with the erosion of contestation reflected in the demise of political and legal frameworks that reflected and structured geopolitical rivalries.

## Liberal War and the Biopolitical Critique

Perhaps the most well-known advocates of a biopolitical framework of critique and framing of the international in terms of the return to global war are radical academics Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who argue that modern war has exceeded the territorial boundaries of both nation-states and international law, and should be seen as globalized or imperial civil war (Hardt & Negri, 2006: 3–4):

The world is at war again, but things are different this time. Traditionally war has been conceived as the armed conflict between sovereign political entities, that is, during the modern period, between nation states. To the extent that the sovereign authority of nation states, even the most dominant nation states, is declining and there is instead emerging a new supranational form of sovereignty, a global Empire, the conditions and nature of war and political violence are necessarily changing. War is becoming a general phenomenon, global and interminable.

Hardt & Negri (2006: 5) assert that today we are witnessing a 'general global state of war', which erodes the distinctions of modern territorialized frameworks of politics and law: between the domestic and the international, war and peace, and combatant and civilian. War, in this framework, becomes the key to understanding power relations in liberal governmental or biopolitical terms of regulation. On the basis of, and reflecting upon, the declarations of US authorities, Hardt & Negri (2006: 14) understand global war as unending and unlimited struggle to control and regulate the global social and economic order:

One consequence of this new kind of war is that the limits of war are rendered indeterminate, both spatially and temporally. The old-fashioned war against a nation state was clearly defined spatially . . . and the end of such a war was generally marked by the surrender, victory, or truce between the conflicting states. By contrast, war against a concept or a set of practices, somewhat like a war of religion, has no definite spatial or temporal boundaries. . . . Indeed, when US leaders announced the 'war against terrorism' they emphasized that it would have to extend throughout the world and continue for an indefinite period, perhaps decades or even generations. A war to create and maintain social order can have no end. It must involve the continuous, uninterrupted exercise of power and violence. In other words, one cannot win such a war, or, rather, it has to be won again every day. War has thus become indistinguishable from police activity.

Here, global war is understood to encompass the very framework of modern politics: a war that the dominant elites are alleged to need to wage to maintain or police their system of biopolitical order. The shift from a policy discourse of national defence to one of global security is seen, at face value, as demonstrating the construction of a new global and deterritorialized order that depends on 'actively and constantly shaping the environment through military and/or police activity. Only an actively shaped world is a secure world' (Hardt & Negri, 2006: 20). Hardt & Negri draw freely from the Foucauldian

problematic that reads politics to be merely the extension of – or another form of – war, thereby inverting (or clarifying) the Clausewitzian proposition that war is the continuation of politics by other means (see Foucault, 2003: 15; 2007: 305–306). War becomes then a generalized concept for political struggle and the reproduction of power relations.

In inverting Clausewitz, Foucault (2003: 15–16) was intentionally deconstructing the division between war and politics to draw out the inequalities and power relations that are hidden behind the façade of liberal frameworks of political and legal equality, demonstrating that it is these frameworks themselves that are produced by and reproduce hegemonic relations of domination. For Foucault (2003: 13–14), the argument that politics is a form of war was intended to overcome what he saw as the narrow economic determinism of the Marxist political movement of his day. However, the conflation of war with politics has allowed theorists working within the Foucauldian framework to make global war a technique of regulatory control, central to the reconstitution of power relations. As Vivienne Jabri (2007: 116) argues: 'War itself is, in these circumstances and frameworks of knowledge, a regulatory practice, a technology of government that aims at the wholesale transformation of societies as well as the international system as a whole.'

For many critical post-structuralist theorists, the 'global war on terror' reveals the essence of liberal modernity and fully reveals the limits of its universalist ontology of peace and progress, where the reality of Kant's 'perpetual peace' is revealed to be perpetual war (Reid, 2006: 18). Perhaps the most radical abstract framing of global war is that of Giorgio Agamben. In his seminal work *Homo Sacer*, he reframed Foucault's understanding of biopower in terms of the totalizing control over bare life, arguing that the 'exemplary places of modern biopolitics [were] the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century' (Agamben, 1998: 4; see also Chandler, 2009a). Agamben's view of liberal power is that of the concentration camp writ globally, where we are all merely objects of power, 'we are all virtually *homines sacri*' (Agamben, 1998: 115).

In focusing on biopower as a means of critiquing universalist policy discourses of global security, critical theorists of global war from diverse fields such as security studies (Jabri, 2007), development (Duffield, 2007) or critical legal theory (Douzinas, 2007) are in danger of reducing their critique of war to abstract statements instrumentalizing war as a technique of global power. These are abstract critiques because the political stakes are never in question: instrumentality and the desire for regulation and control are assumed from the outset. In effect, the critical aspect is merely in the reproduction of the framework of Foucault – that liberal discourses can be deconstructed as an exercise of regulatory power. Without deconstructing the dominant framings of global security threats, critical theorists are in danger of reproducing Foucault's framework of biopower as an ahistorical abstraction.

Foucault (2007: 1) himself stated that his analysis of biopower was 'not in any way a general theory of what power is. It is not a part or even the start of such a theory', merely the study of the effects of liberal governance practices, which posit as their goal the interests of society – the population – rather than government.

In his recent attempt at a ground-clearing critique of Foucauldian international relations theorizing, Jan Selby (2007) poses the question of the problem of the translation of Foucault from a domestic to an international context. He argues that recasting the international sphere in terms of global liberal regimes of regulation is an accidental product of this move. This fails to appreciate the fact that many critical theorists appear to be drawn to Foucault precisely because drawing on his work enables them to critique the international order in these terms. Ironically, this 'Foucauldian' critique of 'global wars' has little to do with Foucault's understanding or concerns, which revolved around extending Marx's critique of the 'freedoms' of liberal modernity. In effect, the post-Foucauldians seek an easier topic: they desire to understand and to critique war and military intervention as a product of the regulatory coercive nature of liberalism. This project owes much to the work of Agamben and his focus on the regulation of 'bare life', where the concentration camp, the totalitarian state and (by extension) Guantánamo Bay are held to constitute a moral and political indictment of liberalism (Agamben, 1998: 4).

In these critical frameworks, global war is understood as the exercise of global aspirations for control, no longer mediated by the interstate competition that was central to traditional 'realist' framings of international relations. This less-mediated framework understands the interests and instrumental techniques of power in global terms. As power becomes understood in globalized terms, it becomes increasingly abstracted from any analysis of contemporary social relations: viewed in terms of neoliberal governance, liberal power or biopolitical domination. In this context, global war becomes little more than a metaphor for the operation of power. This war is a global one because, without clearly demarcated political subjects, the unmediated operation of regulatory power is held to construct a world that becomes, literally, one large concentration camp (Agamben, 1998: 171) where instrumental techniques of power can be exercised regardless of frameworks of rights or international law (Agamben, 2005: 87). For Julian Reid (2006: 124), the 'global war on terror' can be understood as an inevitable response to any forms of life that exist outside – and are therefore threatening to – liberal modernity, revealing liberal modernity itself to be ultimately a 'terrorising project' arraigned against the vitality of life itself. For Jabri, and other Foucauldian critics, the liberal peace can only mean 'unending war' to pacify, discipline and reconstruct the liberal subject:

The discourse from Bosnia to Kosovo to Iraq is one that aims to reconstruct societies and their government in accordance with a distinctly Western liberal model the formative

elements of which centre on open markets, human rights and the rule of law, and democratic elections as the basis of legitimacy. The aim is no less than to reconstitute polities through the transformation of political cultures into modern, self-disciplining, and ultimately self-governing entities that, through such transformation, could transcend ethnic or religious fragmentation and violence. The trajectory is punishment, pacification, discipline, and ultimately 'liberal democratic self-mastery'. Each step in turn services wider, global remits so that the pacified, the disciplined, the self-governing of the liberal order can no longer pose a threat either to their own or to others. (Jabri, 2007: 124–125; see also Duffield, 2007)

Control over, or the ordering of, society is written in global terms rather than national ones. These critical post-structuralist frameworks see global war as an extended desire for control – as the extension of liberal governmentality from the national sphere to the global one. The Foucauldian critics of global war take at face value the problematization of the non-Western world – seen as a threat to the needs of the liberal biopolitical order – and the policy frameworks, which are seen to have the global aims asserted by their proponents. Where the critics of global war differ from its advocates appears to be essentially over whether these liberal values and aspirations are worth fighting for, rather than on the context and stakes of the globalized struggle itself. For the radical Foucauldian and post-structuralist critics, it is liberal values and frameworks that lead to war and construct the non-Western 'other' as an object of intervention, whether through military means or non-military frameworks of development (Duffield, 2007).

The ad hoc, counterproductive and often irrational interventions of Western states and international institutions are therefore understood (and rationalized) through the framework of an essentialized liberal teleology of progress and Western mission. Beate Jahn (2007a: 90–94), for example, argues that the global policy rhetoric of the post-Cold War period is not exceptional but inherent in the expansionist dynamic of liberalism, with its teleological approach to history and development – with liberal frameworks held to be the pinnacle to be reached by all, once the barriers to progress have been lifted – that is implicitly global in conception (see also Jahn, 2007b). Furthermore, Jahn (2007a: 103) argues that the 'totalizing ideology of liberalism' is an essential driver of interventionist foreign policy. This is an ideology so powerful that it is held to explain Western policy however irrational it appears on its own terms (Jahn, 2007b: 226–227):

In sum, the reason for the repetition of these counterproductive policies lies in the length, breadth and depth of the power of the liberal ideology. . . . Ultimately, the length and breadth of the power of liberalism lies in its depth: providing the foundational world view for liberal societies in general and for their social sciences in particular. . . . [T]he liberal ideology has been able to reassert itself in spite of a host of scientific analyses questioning every single one of its claims – resulting in studies in which conclusions stand in blatant contradiction to the analysis itself.

For radical critics of global wars, such as Jahn, these wars reveal the contradictory essence of the liberal global order, in which governance is organized around a teleological view of liberal peace and progress. The failures or counterproductive nature of many of these interventions is seen to merely confirm the contradictions and limits of liberalism and the liberal aspiration to control and order society. It is these limits and contradictions that are seen to be fully expressed in the globalization of liberal frameworks, particularly with the end of the Cold War.

Ironically, the broadly Foucauldian critique of global war, in terms of liberal strategies of control, regulation and transformation, has become so established that liberal policymakers and national and international institutions are beginning to reproduce the critique of 'liberal models' as a way of understanding and rationalizing policy interventions. Many reflections on the problems of international intervention, whether in terms of the humanitarian wars in the Balkans or the 'global war on terror' interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have argued that the problem was the export of liberal frameworks of the market and democracy. The liberal paradigms are alleged to have meant that policymakers had unrealistic expectations of intervention, failing to realize the problems of local 'capture' of ambitious peacebuilding or statebuilding interventions (Paris & Sisk, 2009). This 'self-critique' of liberal policy frameworks mimics the Foucauldians and flatters policy actors. Rather than being presented as shambolic, ad hoc or inadequately thought through, interventions can be rewritten as morally and strategically well designed, merely coming unstuck on their overestimation of the capacity of the target populations.

## Carl Schmitt's Critique

The growing popularity of critical Foucauldian approaches, which understand conflict in the framework of global war and the new global liberal order, has been reflected in the revival of interest in the work of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt and Foucault may seem like strange 'bed-fellows' considering their differing political outlooks and aspirations; in fact, their interconnection is not so surprising. Where 'scaled up' Foucauldian critical frameworks are vulnerable is in explaining why liberal governance should need or choose to take such a militarized form in the absence of apparent challenges (and bearing in mind Foucault's own contrast between coercive sovereign power and biopolitical approaches). Schmitt's work seems to offer a much more grounded connection between liberalism and 'unending war' or unlimited conflict. Critical theorists, who rely on the fragile grounds of an essentialized connection between liberalism and global war, therefore tend to rely heavily



on Schmitt to provide theoretical substance to their rather abstract theoretical framework.

Critical theorists have been quick to claim that Schmitt's influence on Leo Strauss was central to the neoconservative ideologies behind the US administration policy in the 'war on terror' (Bishai & Behnke, 2007: 107). Whether or not Schmitt's view of global war is argued to inspire the US administration, there is little question that his framing of the nature of global conflict has been regularly melded with post-Foucauldian frameworks of global governmentality to set up an influential approach to understanding the apparent excesses of modern conflict – especially the abuses of the 'global war on terror', where the USA's denial of rights to 'illegal combatants' in Guantánamo Bay and abuses of prisoners, such as at Abu Ghraib, have been held to be exemplary examples of the new liberal order of global war (see Koskenniemi, 2004).

A recent collection of essays, for example, fêtes Schmitt as a theorist whose international theory – particularly his key work in this area, *The Nomos of the Earth* – can provide us with 'a deeper understanding of the present international relations of crisis and epoch-making change in the normative structures of international society'. Its editors are not alone in asserting that Schmitt's work:

helps to analyse the rise of global terrorism, the current international political environment of the global 'War on Terror', the crisis of international legality, the emergence of US 'imperial' hegemony, and the prevalence of a global interventionist liberal cosmopolitanism. (Odysseos & Petito, 2007a: 3)

Schmitt was writing during the intense inter-imperialist rivalry of the interwar period, and *Nomos* was published in the wake of the destruction of World War II. Schmitt's context was one in which 'global war' was a pressing reality. It is for this reason that Schmitt highlighted the problematic and divisive nature of inter-imperialist rivalry, sharpened by clashes over universal moral claims, which he saw as making it impossible to legitimize a working arrangement between the great powers.

Schmitt presented a powerful set of arguments about conflict and its management. He argued that politics was at heart about conflict (the distinction between 'friend' and 'enemy') and how to handle it. For Schmitt, the management of conflict became easier the more transparent the relations of power were and the more 'objective' the understanding of them. He critiqued liberal universalism on the basis of its abstract character – its lack of material grounding – highlighting instead that there is no political unity of mankind: there is no world unity and therefore attempts to achieve such a unity through 'ideological short-circuits' can only suggest 'fictional unities' (Schmitt, 2003: 335). His critique of liberalism (in both the domestic and the international realms) was that it artificially sought to abolish conflict without being able to practically contain it (see, for example, Schmitt, 1988: 12).

Schmitt saw the growth of US hegemony as undermining the European framework of international law, based on sovereign reciprocity among imperial equals, which 'bracketed' or limited war between them. His was a conservative and one-sided reappraisal of the past. European decline was already manifest in the playing out of World War I within Europe and the breaking down of the European 'amity lines' that were racially as well as territorially institutionalized (Schmitt, 2003: 219; see also Chandler, 2008a). The USA was as much the beneficiary as the cause of European decline. Of course, it suited European elites to focus on the role of this 'upstart' power in the postwar peace settlements and the shaping of a new international order, rather than look for failings closer to home. Schmitt's conservative political perspective is apparent in his tendency to see US claims to universalism as responsible for the unconstrained or unlimited nature of conflict in the 20th century. Part of the key to Schmitt's appeal to today's critical theorists is the fact that the global conflict of the world wars is redescribed in terms of the problem of US hegemony. At the descriptive level, Schmitt associates the universal claims of US power with the development of absolute enmity, where the enemy is demonized as 'inhuman' and war is unlimited.

Taken out of context (see Chandler, 2008b), Schmitt is read as arguing against universalism *per se*, as if universal claims automatically equated with barbarism while claims based on particularist national interests were somehow more civilized (see also Devetak, 2007). However, Schmitt is ill-suited to the essentially descriptive, critical post-structuralist 'critique' of empire, understood as US hegemonic sovereignty, equipped with 'decisionist' power and the normalization of the state of exception. His point was not so much that the USA was exercising global hegemonic power but rather the opposite: that this universalistic version of international law was abstract and, in fact, powerless to create order. As the Italian theorist Alessandro Colombo (2007: 32–33) notes with regard to the theory of just war: 'In comparison to its medieval precedent, it lacks reference to a concrete institutional order, an adequate bearer of such an order (as the Church was before the civil wars of religion) and also a substantive idea of justice.' Schmitt was not arguing against universalism *per se*, but against illegitimate or fictional universalism, as an idealized form without material content.

The problem, as articulated by Schmitt, was not that there was a new *nomos* of US hegemony but that the USA was strong enough to undermine the old European order but not strong enough to found a new global one. The world was still divided, but with no agreement on methods of international regulation. The interwar order of the League of Nations may have proclaimed a global order, but it reflected merely the destruction of the old spatial order into 'spaceless universalism, [while] no new order took its place'; the League conferences could not create genuine enforceable law 'because they had neither the content of the old, specifically European spatial order nor the

content of a new global spatial order' (Schmitt, 2003: 192). The USA could undermine the old order, but the League, excluding the main powers – the USA and the Soviet Union – could not give content to a new one (Schmitt, 2003: 245). Schmitt was not concerned with limiting exercises of hegemonic imperial power abroad but with the bigger picture of global order between great powers, where he normatively hoped for the emergence of an imperial balance of power (Schmitt, 2003: 355).

What today's critical theorists take from Schmitt is the contingent reading that liberal universalist claims lead to unlimited war and the transformation of the enemy into a 'criminal'. In fact, Schmitt becomes re-read as a pluralist post-structuralist, warning against the dictatorial hegemonic power of US or global neoliberal empire (see, for example, Mouffe, 2007; Petito, 2007; Ojakangas, 2007; Prozorov, 2007). The post-Foucauldian critique of sovereign power is transferred to a critique of the USA as the hegemonic sovereign of the international sphere. Extensions of and, more often, the undermining of international legal agreements are seen, therefore, as sovereign acts of deciding upon the exception and of normalizing the power of exception (see, for example, Jabri, 2007: 95, 99). Paradoxically, Schmitt, the founding theorist of a 'geopolitical' framework of international relations, is essentially conscripted to wage a highly abstract critique of 'power', 'empire' or 'the liberal project', which is seen as steamrolling over resistance on the grounds that the latter is not valid; that those who resist should be 'eliminated' as 'inhuman' or 'criminal'.

This approach to Schmitt parallels the way that critical theorists reproduce Foucault's historically specific grounding of biopolitics – in the domestic crisis of state legitimacy and the state's search for validation in regulation of the free play of market-based interests (Foucault, 2008) – in an essentialized form, reducing it to a lifeless abstraction. Schmitt's understanding of the 'unlimited' global war of the 20th century, where the political stakes of inter-imperialist rivalries undermined the framework of legal constraints, is reproduced merely in form, as an abstraction: without contesting interest-bearing political subjects. The critical grounding of global war in the needs of biopolitical or neoliberal capitalist domination and control appears to take the critique of liberalism from Foucault and Schmitt, but only at the cost of reducing historically grounded theorizing to assertions of an essentialized link between liberalism and global war.

## Grounding the Abstraction of Global War

The critical opponents of liberal global war understand the globalization of war as stemming from the perceived security interests of Western actors: the

need to enforce liberal governance domestically and internationally. They argue that the liberal outlook can only see the world in bifurcated terms of 'us' and 'them', where the act of intervention is necessary to transform – through war, development or democratization – societies or individuals to fit the Western liberal image. In effect, this global war of liberal governance has no specific enemy but appears to be a generalized or free-floating drive of control and domination. War without enemies is a far cry from the central concerns of theorists of the last century, such as Carl Schmitt, for whom the enmity of class conflict or inter-imperialist rivalry threatened to become absolutized (where 'real enemies' were turned into 'absolute enemies').

Today, it appears that global war is becoming 'absolute' without the prior existence of clear political stakes: without the fundamental political clash of social or class forces that can clarify the strategic and political-military goals of intervention. In one of his later works, *The Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt (2004) touched on the problem of war (or, more properly, 'violence') freed from strategic ends – conflict without genuine political stakes or, in his terminology, without 'real enemies'. Schmitt argued that war in the 19th century was increasingly fought in ways that blurred the distinctions of classical martial law, particularly in the role of irregular fighters or partisans that resisted enemy or colonial occupations. For Schmitt (2004: 13), the 'genuine' partisan had a *tellurian* character, and the fact that the partisan's struggle was tied to a specific territory made the struggle a defensive and limited one.

Schmitt (2004: 14) sought to counterpose the 'genuine', territorialized, or *telluric* partisan to the development of more irrational and ad hoc, or non-instrumental, partisan struggle:

The partisan will present a specifically terrestrial type of the active fighter for at least as long as anti-colonial wars are possible. . . . However, even the autochthonous partisan . . . is drawn into the force-field of irresistible technical-industrial progress. His mobility is so enhanced by motorization that he runs the risk of complete dislocation. . . . A motorized partisan loses his tellurian character. All that's left is a transportable, replaceable cog in the wheel of a powerful world-political machine.

For Schmitt (2004: 52), the territorialized partisan was a 'national and patriotic hero', with a real enemy but not an absolute one, whose legitimacy was rooted in a strategic political relationship to a political community. In contrast, the motorized, deterritorialized partisan was dependent on external, foreign backers for support. Schmitt sought to argue that those who were unpatriotic and challenged their governing elites under the banner of revolutionary struggle were illegitimate and externally manipulated as 'replaceable cogs in the wheel of a powerful world-political machine', that is, the Soviet Union.

Schmitt's work expressed fully his understanding of the 'absolute' threat seen to be posed by the revolutionary movement, backed by the funding of the Soviet Union. However, going beyond Schmitt's conservative political

framing and conclusions, he made some fundamentally important points regarding war as a strategic political act and the use of violence as a global or non-strategic, non-instrumental expression of enmity. The shift from the telluric partisan to the deterritorialized combatant – whose struggle was not based on the need for concrete strategy around clear political stakes – is a crucial one. Schmitt argued that deterritorialized struggle, which is potentially unlimited, depended on a break from social and political strategic constraints. This break from strategic constraint largely depended on reliance upon an interested third party, which could underwrite the struggle, although Schmitt (2004: 56) also indicated that, with technological developments, the means could be available for the motorized partisan to provide his own tools of destruction, thereby freeing him from the need for strategy and enabling him to wage his own individual 'war' on the world.

Schmitt argued that without a real enemy there could not be real war in the sense of a politically meaningful struggle. The partisan defence of homeland against an invader or occupier clearly provided a real war and a real enemy. For Schmitt (2004: 66), a deterritorialized war for abstract ideas (such as the revolutionary struggle against capitalism) lacked a real enemy and therefore became global rather than territorial. The implication of Schmitt's argument is that global war can become 'unlimited' or 'absolute' in the sense that there is less that is strategic or instrumental about the waging of it. Global wars can become 'wars of choice', rather than wars of political or strategic necessity, once the enemy becomes an abstraction rather than a concrete opponent. For Schmitt, the deterritorialization of war – the loss of the telluric character of the partisan – was problematic, because conflict became free-floating. As he argued:

Annihilation thus becomes entirely abstract and entirely absolute. It is no longer directed against an enemy, but serves only another, ostensibly objective attainment of highest values, for which no price is too high to pay. It is the renunciation of real enmity that opens the door for the work of annihilation of an absolute enmity. (Schmitt, 2004: 67)

Schmitt argued that waging war without a real enemy was likely to make violence more indiscriminate, rather than less, and that posing war in global terms, rather than limited national ones, reflected the fact that the conflict was less grounded in strategic necessity. In this framework, 'global war' does not necessarily mean war that is more destructive than interstate war. Rather, it indicates a war that is fought without real enemies: war that is driven by ideas of self-expression rather than imposed necessity, and war that is dissociated from any clear strategic grounding in the struggle between the conflicting interests of collective political subjects.

Reading the violence of 'global war' as 'unlimited' owing to its abstract and ungrounded, ad hoc, contingent character provides a useful way of understanding the motorized partisans of deterritorialized, or globalized, terrorist

networks such as Al-Qaeda (see, for example, de Benoist 2007). Perhaps the most insightful of such analyses is that of Faisal Devji's *Landscapes of the Jihad*, in which Devji (2005: 1–2) argues that the abstract, deterritorialized nature of Al-Qaeda's struggle is what has given it its globalized nature:

It was indeed the [disproportion] between Al-Qaeda's severely limited means and seemingly limitless ends that made a global movement of its jihad. . . . This jihad is global not because it controls people, places and circumstances over vast distances, for Al-Qaeda's control of such things is negligible . . . but for precisely the opposite reason: because it is too weak to participate in the politics of control.

Devji makes the compelling point that the violent excesses of Al-Qaeda stem precisely from their lack of connection to a territorial struggle. Once the 'politics of control' are renounced or given up, then struggle is deterritorialized or globalized. For Devji, as for Olivier Roy (2004), Al-Qaeda's 'global war' can only be understood in relation to the defeat of political Islam: as a product of defeat and marginalization rather than a growth of radical purpose, capacity and meaning. For Devji (2005: 156), the global jihad 'has little to do with American malignity and everything to do with the fact that a politics based on national causes is being made increasingly irrelevant'; it is therefore global through weakness and social disconnection rather than through strength, 'a perverse call to ethics in an arena where the old-fashioned politics can no longer operate – because it can no longer control'.

This lack of territorial grounding, or social relationship to a clear constituency, frees 'globalized' combatants, such as Al-Qaeda, from the need for a real, concrete, strategic enemy. The fight against an abstract enemy is not a 'war', properly understood, because there is no political relationship, no strategic engagement, no intentionality relating means to the ends. Gary Ulmen (2007: 103) insightfully argues that fundamentalist terrorists do not engage in war understood politically – that is, they are not engaged in a strategic or instrumental use of violence and 'seek to appeal to no other constituency than themselves'. For Devji (2005: 11–12), the deterritorialized nature of Al-Qaeda's 'global war' can be better understood in comparison with the atomized protest of modern 'global social movements' than in the context of political struggle, where the high stakes and social mobilization of society make destruction inevitable:

[Al-Qaeda is] characteristic of global movements more generally. . . . These are movements whose practices are ethical rather than political in nature because they have been transformed into gestures of risk and duty rather than acts of instrumentality. However instrumental their intentions, the politics of such movements are invariably transformed into ethics at a global level. . . . Like such movements, Greenpeace, for instance, the global effects of the jihad bring together allies and enemies of the most heterogeneous character, who neither know or communicate each with the other, and who in addition share almost nothing by way of a prior history.

However, it is not just modern terrorism that undertakes the projection of

violence without clear strategic frameworks and political goals. There has been no shortage of commentary acknowledging the abstract and problematic nature of the US-led global war 'against a concept'. Devji (2005: 156) himself notes that, 'by its very abstraction, the "War on Terror" leaves behind all enemies of a traditional kind to contend with something more metaphysical than empirical'. Clearly it is the abstract, metaphysical nature of the 'war on terror' that lends itself to being understood and critiqued within Foucauldian frameworks of 'unending' or 'unlimited' global war. For these radical commentators, however, the discursive framing of the 'war on terror' in abstract terms is seen purely as an assertion of global hegemonic power and regulatory intent. The next section seeks to stress that the Western military interventions of today should be understood as 'global' – much like the fundamentalist jihad – not in the sense of aspirations for regulation and control, but in the sense of being non-strategic and lacking a political-military instrumentality.

## Rethinking Global War

Western governments appear to portray some of the distinctive characteristics that Schmitt attributed to 'motorized partisans', in that the shift from narrowly strategic concepts of security to more abstract concerns reflects the fact that Western states have tended to fight free-floating and non-strategic wars of aggression without real enemies at the same time as professing to have the highest values and the absolute enmity that accompanies these. The government policy documents and critical frameworks of 'global war' have been so accepted that it is assumed that it is the strategic interests of Western actors that lie behind the often irrational policy responses, with 'global war' thereby being understood as merely the extension of instrumental struggles for control. This perspective seems unable to contemplate the possibility that it is the lack of a strategic desire for control that drives and defines 'global' war today.

Very few studies of the 'war on terror' start from a study of the Western actors themselves rather than from their declarations of intent with regard to the international sphere itself. This methodological framing inevitably makes assumptions about strategic interactions and grounded interests of domestic or international regulation and control, which are then revealed to explain the proliferation of enemies and the abstract and metaphysical discourse of the 'war on terror' (Chandler, 2009a). For its radical critics, the abstract, global discourse merely reveals the global intent of the hegemonizing designs of biopower or neoliberal empire, as critiques of liberal projections of power are 'scaled up' from the international to the global.

Radical critics working within a broadly Foucauldian problematic have

no problem grounding global war in the needs of neoliberal or biopolitical governance or US hegemonic designs. These critics have produced numerous frameworks, which seek to assert that global war is somehow inevitable, based on their view of the needs of late capitalism, late modernity, neoliberalism or biopolitical frameworks of rule or domination. From the declarations of global war and practices of military intervention, rationality, instrumentality and strategic interests are read in a variety of ways (Chandler, 2007). Global war is taken very much on its own terms, with the declarations of Western governments explaining and giving power to radical abstract theories of the global power and regulatory might of the new global order of domination, hegemony or empire.

The alternative reading of 'global war' rendered here seeks to clarify that the declarations of global war are a sign of the lack of political stakes and strategic structuring of the international sphere rather than frameworks for asserting global domination. We increasingly see Western diplomatic and military interventions presented as justified on the basis of value-based declarations, rather than in traditional terms of interest-based outcomes. This was as apparent in the wars of humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, Somalia and Kosovo – where there was no clarity of objectives and therefore little possibility of strategic planning in terms of the military intervention or the post-conflict political outcomes – as it is in the 'war on terror' campaigns, still ongoing, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There would appear to be a direct relationship between the lack of strategic clarity shaping and structuring interventions and the lack of political stakes involved in their outcome. In fact, the globalization of security discourses seems to reflect the lack of political stakes rather than the urgency of the security threat or of the intervention. Since the end of the Cold War, the central problematic could well be grasped as one of withdrawal and the emptying of contestation from the international sphere rather than as intervention and the contestation for control. The disengagement of the USA and Russia from sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans forms the backdrop to the policy debates about sharing responsibility for stability and the management of failed or failing states (see, for example, Deng et al., 1996). It is the lack of political stakes in the international sphere that has meant that the latter has become more open to ad hoc and arbitrary interventions as states and international institutions use the lack of strategic imperatives to construct their own meaning through intervention. As Zaki Laïdi (1998: 95) explains:

war is not waged necessarily to achieve predefined objectives, and it is in waging war that the motivation needed to continue it is found. In these cases – of which there are very many – war is no longer a continuation of politics by other means, as in Clausewitz's classic model – but sometimes the initial expression of forms of activity or organization in search of meaning. . . . War becomes not the ultimate means to achieve an objective, but the most 'efficient' way of finding one.



The lack of political stakes in the international sphere would appear to be the precondition for the globalization of security discourses and the ad hoc and often arbitrary decisions to go to 'war'. In this sense, global wars reflect the fact that the international sphere has been reduced to little more than a vanity mirror for globalized actors who are freed from strategic necessities and whose concerns are no longer structured in the form of political struggles against 'real enemies'. The mainstream critical approaches to global wars, with their heavy reliance on recycling the work of Foucault, Schmitt and Agamben, appear to invert this reality, portraying the use of military fire-power and the implosion of international law as a product of the high stakes involved in global struggle, rather than the lack of clear contestation involving the strategic accommodation of diverse powers and interests.

## Conclusion

International law evolved on the basis of the ever-present possibility of real war between real enemies. Today's global wars of humanitarian intervention and the 'war on terror' appear to be bypassing or dismantling this framework of international order. Taken out of historical context, today's period might seem to be analogous to that of the imperial and colonial wars of the last century, which evaded or undermined frameworks of international law, which sought to treat the enemy as a *justus hostis* – a legitimate opponent to be treated with reciprocal relations of equality. Such analogies have enabled critical theorists to read the present through past frameworks of strategic political contestation, explaining the lack of respect for international law and seemingly arbitrary and ad hoc use of military force on the basis of the high political stakes involved. Agamben's argument that classical international law has dissipated into a 'permanent state of exception', suggesting that we are witnessing a global war machine – constructing the world in the image of the camp and reducing its enemies to bare life to be annihilated at will – appears to be given force by Guantánamo Bay, extraordinary rendition and Abu Ghraib.

Yet, once we go beyond the level of declarations of policy values and security stakes, the practices of Western militarism fit uneasily with the policy discourses and suggest a different dynamic: one where the lack of political stakes in the international sphere means that there is little connection between military intervention and strategic planning. In fact, as Laïdi suggests, it would be more useful to understand the projection of violence as a search for meaning and strategy rather than as an instrumental outcome. To take one leading example of the 'unlimited' nature of liberal global war: the treatment of terrorist suspects held at Guantánamo Bay, in legal suspension as 'illegal

combatants' and denied Geneva Red Cross conventions and prisoner-of-war status. The 'criminalization' of the captives in Guantánamo Bay is not a case of reducing their status to criminals but the development of an exceptional legal category. In fact, far from criminalizing fundamentalist terrorists, the USA has politically glorified them, talking up their political importance.

It would appear that the designation of 'illegal combatants' could be understood as an ad hoc and arbitrary response to the lack of a clear strategic framework and 'real enemy'. In this context, the concept of criminalization needs to be reconsidered. Guantánamo Bay can be seen instead as an attempt to create an enemy of special status. In fact, with reference to Agamben's thesis, it would be better to understand the legal status of the 'illegal combatants' as sacralizing them rather than reducing them to the status of 'bare life'. In acting in an exceptional way, the USA attempted to create a more coherent and potent image of the vaguely defined security threat.

This approach is very different, for example, from the framework of criminalization used by the British government in the fight against Irish republicanism, where the withdrawal of prisoner-of-war status from republican prisoners was intended to delegitimize their struggle and was a strategic act of war. Ironically, whereas the criminalization of the republican struggle was an attempt to dehumanize the republicans – to justify unequal treatment of combatants – the criminalization of global terrorists has served to humanize them in the sense of giving coherence, shape and meaning to a set of individuals with no clear internally generated sense of connection. Far from 'denying the enemy the very quality of being human', it would appear that the much-publicized abuses of the 'war on terror' stem from the Western inability to cohere a clear view of who the enemy are or of how they should be treated.

The policy frameworks of global war attempt to make sense of the implosion of the framework of international order at the same time as articulating the desire to recreate a framework of meaning through policy activity. However, these projections of Western power, even when expressed in coercive and militarized forms, appear to have little connection to strategic or instrumental projects of hegemony. The concept of 'control', articulated by authors such as Carl Schmitt and Faisal Devji, seems to be key to understanding the transition from strategic frameworks of conflict to today's unlimited (i.e. arbitrary) expressions of violence. Wars fought for control, with a socially grounded telluric character, are limited by the needs of instrumental rationality: the goals shape the means deployed. Today's Western wars are fought in a non-strategic, non-instrumental framework, which lacks a clear relationship between means and ends and can therefore easily acquire a destabilizing and irrational character. To mistake the arbitrary and unlimited nature of violence and coercion without a clear strategic framework for a heightened desire for control fails to contextualize conflict in the social relations of today.

\* David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster and editor of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*. His books include *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance* (Pluto, 2009); *Empire in Denial: The Politics of Statebuilding* (Pluto, 2006); *Constructing Global Civil Society: Morality and Power in International Relations* (Palgrave, 2004); *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention* (Pluto, 2002); and *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton* (Pluto, 1999). He would like to thank the four anonymous *Security Dialogue* reviewers for their insightful, constructive and critical comments on the original draft of this article. E-mail: D.Chandler@Westminster.ac.uk.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio, 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio, 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bishai, Linda S. & Andreas Behnke, 2007. 'War, Violence and the Displacement of the Political', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 107–123).
- Chandler, David, 2007. 'Hollow Hegemony: Theorising the Shift from Interest-Based to Value-Based International Policy-Making', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35(3): 703–723.
- Chandler, David, 2008a. 'The Revival of Carl Schmitt in International Relations: The Last Refuge of Critical Theorists?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37(1): 27–48.
- Chandler, David, 2008b. 'Textual and Critical Approaches to Reading Schmitt: Rejoinder to Odysseos and Petito', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37(2): 477–481.
- Chandler, David, 2009a. *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance*. London: Pluto.
- Chandler, David, 2009b. 'Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach', *International Political Sociology* 3(1).
- Colombo, Alessandro, 2007. 'The "Realist Institutionalism" of Carl Schmitt', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 21–35).
- de Benoist, Alain, 2007. 'Global Terrorism and the State of Permanent Exception: The Significance of Carl Schmitt's Thought Today', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 73–96).
- Deng, Francis M.; Sadikiel Kimaro, Terrence Lyons, David Rothchild & I. William Zartman, 1996. *Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Devetak, Richard, 2007. 'Between Kant and Pufendorf: Humanitarian Intervention, Statist Anti-Cosmopolitanism and Critical International Theory', *Review of International Studies* 33: 151–174.
- Devji, Faisal, 2005. *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. London: Hurst.
- Douzinas, Costas, 2007. *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*. London: Routledge Cavendish
- Duffield, Mark, 2007. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. London: Polity.
- Foucault, Michel, 2003. 'Society Must Be Defended': *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel, 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- Foucault, Michel, 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri, 2001. *Empire*. New York: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri, 2006. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London: Penguin.
- Jabri, Vivienne, 2007. *War and the Transformation of Global Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Jahn, Beate, 2007a. 'The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy: Democratization, Intervention and Statebuilding (Part I)', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1(1): 87–106.
- Jahn, Beate, 2007b. 'The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy: Democratization, Intervention and Statebuilding (Part II)', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1(2): 211–230.
- Koskeniemi, Marti, 2004. 'International Law as Political Theology: How To Read *Nomos der Erde?*', *Constellations* 11(4): 492–511.
- Laïdi, Zaki, 1998. *A World Without Meaning: The Crisis of Meaning in International Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Mouffe, Chantal, 2007. 'Carl Schmitt's Warning on the Dangers of a Unipolar World', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 147–153).
- Odysseos, Louiza & Fabio Petito, 2007a. 'Introduction: The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 1–17).
- Odysseos, Louiza & Fabio Petito, eds, 2007b. *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*. London: Routledge.
- Ojakangas, Mika, 2007. 'A Terrifying World Without an Exterior: Carl Schmitt and the Metaphysics of International (Dis)order', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 205–221).
- Paris, Roland & Timothy D. Sisk, 2009. *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*. London: Routledge.
- Petito, Fabio, 2007. 'Against World Unity: Carl Schmitt and the Western-Centric and Liberal Global Order', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 166–184).
- Prozorov, Sergei, 2007. 'The Ethos of Insecure Life: Reading Carl Schmitt's Existential Decisionism as a Foucauldian Ethics', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 222–241).
- Reid, Julian, 2006. *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity, and the Defence of Logistical Societies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Roy, Olivier, 2004. *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst.
- Schmitt, Carl, 1988. *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schmitt, Carl, 2003. *The Nomos of the Earth: In the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. New York: Telos.
- Schmitt, Carl, 2004. *The Theory of the Partisan: A Commentary/Remark on the Concept of the Political*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Selby, Jan, 2007. 'Engaging Foucault: Discourse, Liberal Governance and the Limits of Foucauldian IR', *International Relations* 21(3): 324–345.
- Ulmen, Gary L., 2007. 'Partisan Warfare, Terrorism and the Problem of a New Nomos of the Earth', in Odysseos & Petito (2007b: 97–106).