

The impurity of war

François-Bernard Huyghe*

François-Bernard Huyghe has a doctorate in political science and conducts research into information and communication science. He works as a trainer and consultant.

Abstract

Progressive democratization, the presence of a military superpower and the dream of an international order maintained by an international authority do not enhance the appearance of conventional armed conflicts. However, the discovery of new frailties that can be exploited by aggressors, the proliferation of motives – including ideological motives – for waging war, and the spread of technologies that can be used in new forms of warfare have led to war and armed conflicts breaking out of their classic mould, becoming hybrid and going beyond their previous boundaries. The author argues for an updated polemology which endeavours to explain the mechanisms of these new types of warfare.



There was once a time, perhaps a very brief moment in European history, when it hardly made sense to ask the question ‘Who is at war?’; every individual was inevitably a member of a state which was either at peace or at war¹ and was either a civilian or a member of the armed forces. If someone bore weapons, it had to be to fight a private enemy (possibly to commit a crime) or to fight the enemy designated by politics. Death – of one soldier at the hands of another, if possible – was expected to occur during certain periods (the duration of the conflict) and in accordance with standards that were rightly called the laws of war. The recent clash between Russia and Georgia, involving tanks, uniforms, front lines, an armistice and negotiations, bears little resemblance to that model (the demise of which one should perhaps not be too hasty to proclaim).

* Website: <http://www.huyghe.fr>.

Declaring war and peace

War used to be a matter for authorized entities – that is, sovereign states. In a rather roundabout way, the authority to declare war and to designate the enemy was one of the attributes of the sovereign power. Those entities took the requirement of clarity so far as to surround the act of violence with acts of communication.² They declared war (or even mobilization) at the beginning and peace when the hostilities were over. The period of bloodshed in between gave rise to various documents and reminiscent items ranging from peace treaties affirming a decision (submission by the defeated party or compromise), accounts and chronicles, monuments to commemorate ‘our’ victory or ‘our dead’ and ‘their’ defeat, songs and so on.

The gates of the temple of Janus in Rome used to be open in wartime and were closed again when peace was declared. In twentieth-century France, a certain type of poster and a particular typography were reserved for general mobilizations, and the victory parade followed a standard scenario. The paradoxical objective of so much codified ostentation was to enforce silence – that of the weapons and that of the defeated party, which would cease to speak to posterity and to state its political claims. Wartime and peacetime were punctuated by symbolic marks: people fought to change History with a capital ‘H’ and it rewarded them by preserving their histories with a small ‘h’.

The temple of war

The emergence of new sub-state players, new types of weapons and new ideological representations (among both the strong and the weak) overturned those features and encouraged the multiplication of hybrid or indeterminate conflicts, a matter which can only be understood if one goes back to the basic definition of war.

The will

The will to impose one’s law on another (war as a ‘clash of wills’, as Clausewitz put it)³ is an inherent aspect of war relations: at least one party issues claims (to a territory, a resource, a political change, the ascendancy of a set of values or the disappearance of an ethnic group) and attempts to force its adversary to agree or retreat. If the will is clear (and what could be clearer than a declaration by the sovereign?) and the objective is known (the claim or the disagreement), the other elements fit into place.

1 Alberico Gentili (*De jure belli*, 1585) defined war as ‘armorum publicorum justa contentio’, or ‘war is an armed conflict that is public and just’ (just in the eyes of those practising it, of course).

2 Including ‘performative’ statements which create a new situation merely by virtue of having been pronounced. See John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962.

3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989.

Lethality

After all, war has long been the time ‘when fathers buried their sons’, or the time when the death rate associated with organized violence changes demographic balances.⁴ The possibility of collectively meting out or being put to death is a constitutive element of war; it takes place according to certain prescribed forms and within a particular relationship with unknown men that are recognized only between enemies.

Technicity

There can be no warfare without weapons – that is, without specific tools. Although a weapon may be used for other purposes – such as hunting, training or displaying – it is first and foremost a tool made to kill or at least to overcome. Weapons have an impact on flesh but also on the mind, on which they have a constraining impact (in that sense, what weapons and the media have in common is that they are both tools which work on the human brain).

Symbolicity

Here, the notion of ‘symbol’ is to be taken in the broadest sense: men believe jointly in ideas that are given substance through performances. Flags or uniforms which exist merely to represent the homeland or adherence to the army are the most visible components of a vast construction. There can be no war unless there is a community which is first convinced of its own existence as a historical force, has its own picture of the enemy and is sure that there are reasons to kill or to die. Those reasons may be extremely varied: to add to its collection of skulls (which is proof of prestige in some civilizations), to overthrow the new Hitler (Milošević, Saddam, etc.) or to establish universal democratic peace in other cultures. In all those cases, complex devices are needed to organize those common beliefs in opposition to the beliefs and symbols of the adversary.

What we have just described is obviously a standardized ideal which is not always manifested in practice with that degree of clarity. Hence, even at the height of ‘classic’ European warfare, the fighting became ‘civilian’ or ‘partisan’ and toppled those fine binary ways of thinking. One of the two parties concerned aspired to a quality that the other denied it (liberation army or legitimate popular resistance). It claimed to be at war in a situation in which the other party – possibly the colonial or occupying state – perceived nothing but disorder, pillaging, insurrection and banditry. However, things were finally resolved: either the state won (and was then able to speak of a victorious counter-insurrection) or the other party won and, in doing so, justified its aspiration to assume legitimate authority or to proclaim the independence of a state with its own territory. A war for the state became *a posteriori* a war of and by the state.

4 Gaston Bouthoul, *L’infanticide différencié*, Hachette, Paris, 1970.

War is a chameleon

As everyone can see, those fine certainties have melted away. For example, a French national, like the author of this text, or another European simply has to ask the people around him ‘Are we at war in Afghanistan?’ to obtain the most diverse answers. There are those who think that an international peacekeeping operation has nothing in common with a war and those who assert that we are carrying out a colonial war in the service of American imperialism – not forgetting the pragmatists who maintain that if the Taliban killed ten French soldiers in August 2008 and are winning over whole provinces in advance of NATO, it is beginning to look more like a war than an international police initiative.

The uncertainty in that case is reinforced by the many different criteria of war (which Clausewitz described as a ‘chameleon’):⁵

- Criterion relating to the parties involved. What does ‘the Taliban’ mean – is it an army, a guerrilla force or a band of terrorists? At what stage in the organization or legitimacy does one of the two parties deserve to be called an army? When does it cease to be considered as a disruptive factor and attain the dignity of a possible contributor to History? And when does it stop being a force of repression and assume the prestigious status of a recognized enemy?
- Criterion associated with the means employed. When some use missiles and others mortars, it becomes difficult to refer to private or marginal violence.
- Criterion of the degree of violence, or of the mortality rate, which is anything but negligible in Afghanistan, especially if the civilian victims are taken into account.
- Criterion of the awareness of the belligerents of being ‘at war’ or of the political category under which they operate. However, in that case, those who claim to be engaged in a *jihad* are certain that they are at war, whereas the Westerners deny the reality of war – unless they resort to using acronyms and neologisms such as ‘military assistance’, ‘peacekeeping’ or, to use NATO jargon, ‘operations other than war’ (OOTW) in an attempt to conceal a reality whose official acknowledgement would give too much prestige to the adversary. That a nation can be at war ‘without knowing it’ – in other words without paying too much attention to the sometimes perilous policing tasks carried out on its behalf by professionals on the fringe of the Empire – is hardly something to boast about.
- Criterion of the objectives of the armed forces. It is well known that ‘the purpose of all war is peace’ (Saint Augustine) and that ‘war is the pursuit of politics by other means’ (Clausewitz⁶). Clearly, even if war can be used for private purposes (the Prince’s fantasies or the interests of cannon-mongers), it only has a meaning when viewed from the perspective of the type of peace sought, and hence the stable order which is to ensue and which it is pursuing. In this case, maintaining the Karzai regime, the stabilization of the country and the removal

⁵ Clausewitz, above note 3, I, ch.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

of the *jihadist* bases seem to form an objective that is entirely political and likely to imply bloodshed.

New forms of armed violence

At this point, the reader is justified in questioning the interest of an ontology of war, in wondering whether the interest of the category goes beyond exercising the ingenuity of philosophers and lawyers, and ultimately, whether what counts is deaths or words. That way of thinking is that of schools such as 'irenology' or 'peace research',⁷ which empty the concept of war of all meaning (leaving them suspecting those who use it of being at least 'fatalists', if not complacent about the repeated recurrence of vast collective massacres). War is thus said to be just one form of violence among others and one that has merged with all the great tragedies of humanity, including environmental disasters, and that it is more urgent to diagnose than classify. At the other end of the ideological spectrum, strategists have a growing tendency to blur the 'archaic' category of war from the perspective of security in the face of criminal activities, technological dangers, disasters, terrorism and so on.

Reviewing the concept of war

However, we consider it indispensable to review the concept of war, regardless of how threatened and improbable that concept may seem today. First of all, it is a fundamental anthropological experience, as inscribed in our mythology and in our subconscious, reflected in our institutions and sometimes also in the law. All are free to be annoyed that there is still a right 'to' war (just or unjust warfare) or a right in war, but it is better for those rights to exist and protect the combatants than not.

To give just one example, it may be of great importance to recognize the status of enemy combatants. When the United States interned *jihadists* at Guantánamo, they labelled the detainees 'unlawful combatants' to avoid having to apply the Geneva Conventions and/or US penal law to them. That bizarre status was that of German saboteurs during the Second World War (neither combatants who had to be treated in accordance with the laws of war nor civilians who had to be protected and who were *a priori* innocent)⁸ and of the soldiers (particularly those who were black) of the North fighting the South in the American Civil War.

The second good reason to retain the concept of war is that it has the advantage of implying the opposite concept of peace. If we do not know whether we are at war and whether we have enemies, we run the risk of never being at peace.

7 Johan Galtung, 'Violence, peace and peace research', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6 (3) (1969), pp. 167–91.

8 *Ex parte Quirin* 317 US 1 1942.

New forms of war

Without even mentioning the Cold War, whose chief characteristic was that it remained in force or at risk throughout the second half of the twentieth century, new types of conflict have occurred, some of which are virtual or imagined. This includes fighting between the state entity and combatants who claim to be a liberation or revolutionary army or one with a similar designation. For instance, in the 1950s there was no war, but there were ‘events in Algeria’. Forty years later, the Algerian state was left wondering whether it was at war with underground Islamist fighters or whether it was called upon to maintain order in the face of bandits.

The question becomes crucial when there are a number of different armed entities involved, as was the case with the growing number of militias in Lebanon in the 1980s, or when it is almost impossible to distinguish between politics and criminal activities. In Latin America or in the golden triangle close to Myanmar, it is not easy to tell the difference between an armed band of drug dealers and a guerrilla force.

The distinction between military and civilian⁹ is called into question by the tendency to mobilize non-uniformed combatants, who may be children, and the growing propensity of conflicts to kill more civilians than members of the military forces. When militias massacre groups of people who, as in Darfur, hardly do anything to defend themselves, can we still speak of war? Taking another issue, when a member of a private military company carries out a security mission, is he assisting a ‘real’ army and when does he start to ‘make’ war? Where is the borderline between terrorism, secret warfare, the poor man’s war and guerrilla warfare?

These tensions and contradictions reached their peak on the day when the United States declared a ‘global war on terror’. That leads to the complementary notion of ‘pre-emptive war’¹⁰ which authorizes cross-border armed interventions against terrorist groups or against tyrants who may be supporting those groups and/or possess weapons of mass destruction.

‘Global War on Terror’

The ‘global war on terror’ brings together all the contradictions of new wars:

- The impossibility of defining the adversary: what is terrorism – an ideology, a practice, a crime?
- The difficulty of defining the criterion of victory: the day when there are no more terrorists and no one who wants to attack the United States? When no one is making weapons of mass destruction any longer? When no state is

9 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, Free Press, New York, 1991.

10 On the notion of ‘pre-emptive’ (rather than preventive) war, see François-Bernard Huyghe, *Quatrième guerre mondiale – Faire mourir et faire croire*, Éditions du Rocher, Paris, 2004.

sheltering clandestine armed groups wittingly or against its will? Is there such a thing as war without victory – that is, ‘infinite’ warfare?¹¹

- The inability to pinpoint the start or the end of the war, the place where it is fought and the status of the combatants.
- The difficulty of distinguishing between acts of war (or terrorism), threats, negotiations and so on, as was traditionally the case in relations between belligerents.

In defence of the United States it must be admitted that the challenge issued by the adversary or posed by acts (attacks) and messages (proclamations, communiqués and *fatwas*) exacerbates the ambiguities of terrorist practice.

There is no such thing as terrorism¹² in itself but there are terrorist practices characterized by the secret nature of the organization (the day when a terrorist puts on a uniform and parades without masking his face is the day he has joined a militia), by sporadic strikes (otherwise one would have to speak of battles, of territory won or lost, and so on) and by the choice of symbolic military or civilian objectives. As Camus put it, ‘when a terrorist kills a man, he wants to kill an idea’. They are also characterized by the will to resort to destruction as a means of proclaiming their existence (terrorists want to show who they are, the cause that they represent, their claims, their enemy, their objective and many other things – sometimes with just one bomb).

Terrorism is still a compromise between a ‘poor man’s war’ and ‘propaganda by deed’. Its impure character is made even more complex by two factors. First, terrorists believe themselves to be fighting a religious war in reference to a specific theological category: the defensive *jihad* that they believe is compulsory for every good Muslim. They are convinced, as Bin Laden puts it, that the natural law that prompts everyone to defend his own family by force as well as the rules of the Koran make him a warrior in a state of legitimate defence, a true believer destined for martyrdom, and in no way a terrorist who kills innocent civilians. An organization that is said to be terrorist may at different times launch attacks, fight in a territory like a guerrilla fighter, control a sanctified area and have official status (like the *jihadists* in Afghanistan prior to October 2001), assume a legal façade, even stand for election, accede to power, and so on. It is by definition transitory (just as the war that it wages and is waged against it mutates): it is supposed to lead to revolution, the insurrection of the entire nation or the constitution of a real army.

Second, a recent study by the Rand Corporation examined the question of ‘how terrorist groups end’¹³ and what has happened to 648 terrorist groups since

11 Giulietto Chiesa, *La guerra infinita*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2002.

12 Catherine Bertho Lavenir and François-Bernard Huyghe (eds.), *La scène terroriste*, Cahiers de médiologie No. 13, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 2002, available at www.mediologie.org/collection/13_terrorisme/sommaire13.html (last visited 13 February 2009).

13 *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida*, 2008, Rand Monograph Report, available at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741 (last visited 13 February 2009).

1968 in all countries and across all ideologies. More than half disappeared in just a few years; 43 per cent of the organizations were disbanded quite simply by becoming ‘legal’ political forces. And when they are able to move on to the insurrection stage (that is, more hard-line partisan warfare than clandestine terrorism), in half of the cases they end up negotiating with a government – although it is difficult to imagine al Qaeda one day discussing the establishment of a planetary caliphate with its Jewish and crusading adversaries. Attacks, guerrilla warfare, political action and diplomatic negotiations constitute an ongoing process in which it becomes difficult to separate the military phases from the political phases.

The strong, the weak and planetary control

In the preceding examples, the difficulty of differentiating between wars which comply with the traditional definition and pseudo-wars or ‘para-wars’ is related to a form of disorder or a shortage of means on the part of the weak entity. These conflicts, which some consider archaic (although they may well be the conflicts of the future), occur because there is no ‘real’ state or a ‘real’ army.

However, in other cases, war is transformed by the powerful entity, either as the generator of ideological and political structures or as the possessor of new instruments. That tends to deprive the war that it wages of certain previously held characteristics of ostensible violence, territoriality and circumscribed duration.

A revolution or transformation in military affairs

Theories for several of those changes have been developed, particularly in the United States – including the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA).¹⁴ The RMA, proclaimed after the collapse of the USSR (although its origins go back far further), was revelatory of a paradigm shift. It revolves around the vast US military superiority and a technicist view. The predominance of US forces must also be expressed in the use of information technologies – regardless of whether this applies to intelligence, ‘making the battlefield transparent’, striking where force is effective, coordinating its own forces perfectly, responding instantaneously from the ‘captor’ which detects the targets to the gunner without having to go through the cumbersome traditional chain of military command – with the advocates of the RMA ultimately thinking of the army as a ‘system of systems’. The RMA is open to the full range of speculation on future weapons based on nanotechnologies, guided energy, and so on against a background of the explosion of information technology. Some dream of an automated conflict fought by robots and where there will be little place for outdated devices such as tanks or aircraft carriers.

14 Andrew Latham, *Understanding the RMA: Brandelian Insights into the transformation of Warfare*, No. 2, PSIS, Geneva, 1999.

The pioneers of the RMA – followed by their successors in the 2000s, who returned to a more realistic vision and prefer to speak of ‘transformation’ rather than revolution – continue to extol the merits of a very ‘high-tech’ vision, according to which the United States would be able to destroy any conventional force as if punishment fell from heaven. However, they have understood that the enemy of the future will ‘cheat’. It will position itself in an asymmetrical logic and endeavour to transform its own weaknesses into strengths, particularly with regard to the media and public opinion. The ‘strong’ will have to resolve problems of low-intensity conflicts, terrorism and guerrilla warfare with civilian adversaries in a context which increasingly resembles policing on a planetary scale.

Multiple-objective armed intervention

In parallel, the international system – to avoid saying the West – has invented new armed interventions covering reprisals, sanctions and even humanitarian interventions. They have to keep the protagonists apart or protect populations. The language used by the powers involved emphasizes that they are conducting an ‘altruistic’ war which does not place them at any advantage. They say that they are combating criminals or enemies of humankind, leaders and not people, their task being, conversely, to save them.

This leads to the right to take action justifying the use of armed force to stave off unacceptable violence or ethnic purging. There is an increase in the number of military operations, which we refer to as ‘control operations’, carried out to prevent armed violence on the part of the poor and archaic (ethnic clashes, for example). In this case, war merges, at least in its rhetoric, with police operations (which should essentially be reserved for maintaining internal order but which globalization has extended to the dimension of the planet).

Asymmetrical warfare

Of the categories used to describe new forms of armed conflict, that of asymmetrical warfare is particularly revelatory.¹⁵ It is based on the means used (the poor man’s war as opposed to the excessively armed rich man’s high-tech war), on strategy (attrition as opposed to control) and also on the objectives. For the strong, the rule is to stop or limit the activities of the weak, who can hardly hope to take its capital or force it to sign a surrender document or a treaty. For the weak, the rule is to hold on, impose a loss in the moral sphere or in the area of public opinion, demoralize where it is impossible to disarm, and make the continuation of the conflict unbearable. Asymmetrical warfare is based more on the use of information than on the use of power and is therefore out of line with all classic conceptions. It suggests that strategic victory is not the sum of tactical victories; it does not shift

15 See Steven Metz, ‘La guerre asymétrique et l’avenir de l’Occident’, *Politique Etrangère*, No. 1 (2003), pp. 26–40.

the question of the legitimacy of war (and hence of the beliefs behind it) as a preliminary issue, but makes it its very objective.

Three-block and fourth-generation warfare

Variants of the concept of asymmetrical warfare have emerged recently. Many hold firm to the utopia of a Revolution in Military Affairs but allow the emergence of new categories of strategic thinking.

For instance, ‘three-block warfare’, a term coined by General Charles Krulak: ‘In one moment in time, our service members will be feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing humanitarian assistance. In the next moment, they will be holding two warring tribes apart – conducting peacekeeping operations – and, finally, they will be fighting a highly lethal mid-intensity battle – all on the same day ... all within three city blocks.’¹⁶ A possible scenario of that kind requires the command to be decentralized (a mere corporal must be able to decide if the environment is hostile, neutral or friendly and the degree of violence to apply).

With regard to ‘fourth-generation warfare’, an idea that has been debated since 1989,¹⁷ it represents the outcome of a historical evolution. The first generation was based on the human mass arranged in lines and columns on the battlefield. The second depended on firepower – early on, that of machine gun and then of aircraft – and mobilized upstream a vast industrial machine. The third implied manoeuvrability, such as the *blitzkrieg* in the Second World War.

What about fourth-generation warfare? It is said to correspond to the information revolution. However, most of all it would mobilize entire populations in hostility that would spread to all areas – political, economic, social and cultural – and that would be directed against the enemy’s mental and organizational system. Totally asymmetrical, it would pit against each other two entities with nothing in common. On the one hand, high-tech powers. On the other, scattered transnational or infranational players, religious, ethnic or special interest groups attacking indiscriminately the market, symbols of Western society, its communications. Its advocates like to present that warfare as global, granular (an allusion to the size and large number of different forms or motivations of the groups involved in the conflict), technological and media-based.

Tools of victory

Of course, all that theoretical output corresponds in the realm of ideas to a relation of power, confrontation between the ‘strong’ – a superpower which is sure that it no longer has to fear a competitor that can measure up to it and which takes charge

16 General Charles Krulak, Commandant US Marine Corps, Remarks at the National Press Club, Washington Transcript Series, 10 October 1997.

17 William S. Lind *et al.*, ‘The changing face of war: into the fourth generation’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, available at www.d-n-i.net/fcs/4th_gen_war_gazette.htm (last visited 19 February 2009).

of the world order – and several kinds of ‘weak’ entities determined to exploit the deficiencies of the system, particularly those of the media. However, the transformation of war is not due merely to the evolution of relations of force and ideas (some will say of ideologies); it is also due to technical change.

Smart weapons

To a large extent, strategists have dreamed up new weapons that are intelligent (packed with computer technology), precise (the famous surgical strikes), controlled from a distance (probably from a ‘war chamber’ full of monitors), equipped with the quasi-omniscience of satellite observation, economical in terms of both destructive force and human lives, set more against the organization or the enemy means of co-ordination than human lives, and capable of ‘shocking and appalling’ an enemy that is completely out of its depth.

Whereas the idea of a ‘zero casualty’ war has been a journalistic invention rather than a real doctrine formulated by the Pentagon, the notion is spreading of a technically perfect war in which the use of violence would be reduced to what is strictly necessary and implemented at the most effective point. From there, there have been two significant developments.

Non-lethal weapons and information weapons

Popularized back in the 1980s and then thanks to a marked expansion of research since the 1990s, the weapon that does not kill or even cause any irreversible damage has truly taken its place in the strategists’ mental universe. Various types of weapons that are said to be non-lethal or barely lethal exist (they are designed not to kill, but there is nothing that – when used in a particular way or in particular circumstances – does not have the potential to kill a human being). These include kinetic energy missiles (such as rubber bullets), chemical irritants or ‘incapacitating’ chemical products, weapons that use electronic impulses to paralyse, as well as sophisticated systems intended to neutralize vehicles, disrupt communication systems, make buildings uninhabitable and so on. And that is without referring to science-fiction devices such as types of radar equipment which emit waves that produce burning sensations or sounds that are unbearable to the human ear, etc.¹⁸

All those weapons correspond to a double finality. The first issue is to avoid displaying – particularly on international television – any form of brutality in the maintenance of internal order when dealing with demonstrators or rioters or externally during clashes with the occupied civilian population. The second notion is that the modern soldier will have a weapon that is both ‘rheostatic’ (its impact can be adjusted depending on the degree of dangerousness of the target) and an intermediary means for situations in which threats or authority are not enough but where it is not yet appropriate to release the full destructive force of ‘real weapons’.

18 David Fidler, ‘The meaning of Moscow: “non-lethal” weapons and international law in the early 21st century’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87 (859) (2005), pp. 525–52.

Those near-wars in which the strong wants above all to keep its violence in check (and not display it to the public), in which it distinguishes between criminal enemies such as terrorists and enemies that are ‘potentially friendly’ or ‘virtually hostile’ (such as the local people whose apparent neutrality at least needs to be guaranteed as action is only taken in their area for their good), and the notions behind them are scarcely in line with the canonical system. Everything is aimed at maintaining an acceptable level of the use of force, both because that is in keeping with how public opinion sees things and because the aim of the military operations is less to win a conflict than to maintain the international order as the internal order, assuming that globalization allows the difference to remain.

Random threats and remote attacks

One of the problems of confusing order/peace and war/disorder is that the strong becomes more aware of random threats. We have referred to terrorism, but there are forms of aggression to which a modern state may be subjected and whose nature it is hard put to define, let alone to define as acts of war justifying retaliation. That is the case of the famous ‘cyber war’ or computer war, an unlikely designation which covers all acts of aggression that can be carried out from a distance, generally with the anonymity of a computer or network of computers. It is an example of the confusion of genres and mixed conflicts that are typical of the present era.

Such attacks may transmit propaganda (accessing a government website to make fun of it or to tag on a vengeful slogan, for example), they may be a form of espionage (to obtain confidential data, to intercept messages) but they may also constitute a form of sabotage: paralysing a government website, attacking a strategically important enterprise, or disrupting what the Americans call vital infrastructures (emergency services, the water or electricity supply, road or air traffic, etc.).

All that involves the use of ‘malware’ and taking control of remote machines. However, when a ‘cyber attack’ is launched on a state, as was recently the case in Estonia or Georgia, that state is immediately confronted with the problem of tracing the aggression (where does the attack come from and who is actually in charge of the websites and servers from which it seems to come?) and with the question of the extent of the damage suffered. Who is leading the attack? A government service? Mercenaries that can be ‘hired’ on the Internet? A private militant, criminal or terrorist group? How can the damage be assessed and when is it to be defined as an act of war, particularly if no one is killed? What is private or public in the matter?

Similarly, a cyber attack raises the issue of how to interpret the attacker’s intentions. The attack may be intended to prepare or accompany a conventional military attack, but it may also act as a warning – an act of sabotage as a message to support a claim or a threat. It becomes difficult to decide how to respond (difficult, for example, to respond to malware by a volley of bombs and even more difficult to

justify the action in the United Nations). The entire issue is further complicated by the fact that as a cyber attack follows the logic of chaos (the greater disorder it creates and consequently the more time, energy and money is wasted, the more effective it is), the relation between the desired effect and the effect obtained will never be known.

The same reasoning would probably apply to economic attacks carried out by means of stock-market rumours or manipulations and to health or environmental attacks, which are just as difficult to prove (especially thanks to the media coverage of economic, criminal, ideological or terrorist groups acting as mercenaries or executants).

The image of war

While sabotaging information systems (the vectors and containers) or theft or manipulation of data (the content) can be referred to as 'information warfare', there is a third aspect, which concerns public opinion: everything that has less to do with the availability or the functionality of a useful piece of information than with the dissemination of an emotional message. Hence the information war consists of ensuring that one's own version of the facts, images, values, dissatisfaction and antipathies are given greater prominence than those of the other party.¹⁹

Viewed from that perspective, the relationship between the strong and the weak has changed since the Vietnam War (a period when the United States was losing the war of images because it had no control over them) and the first Gulf war (a period when the United States was winning the war of images thanks to CNN's monopoly of the visible war). Now anyone can paint their own picture. While the United States produces a thoroughly Hollywood-style version of the war in Iraq (with heroic soldiers, the statue of the dictator falling from its pedestal, etc.), the *jihādists* give their public a digital version of the occupation of Iraq, with video testimonies of future martyrs and traitors being punished, filmed while they were being executed. When the Palestinians train their cameras on their victim or when Hezbollah launches its own television channel, the pro-Israelis produce whole programmes on the Internet or on television to show that everything is faked and that Tsahal is the least bloodthirsty army in the world.

Since wars have ceased to be fought on the battlefield alone but are also fought in cyberspace and on all the television sets in the world, the war of representations, which targets 'hearts and minds', has become at least as important as the real military successes.

19 See definition in François-Bernard Huyghe, *Maîtres du faire croire. De la propagande à l'influence*, Vuibert, Paris, 2008.

Conclusion

Should we give up trying to understand war or to define it? We have discussed new symbolic and technical acts of violence and have argued in favour of an updated polemology²⁰ that would endeavour to explain the mechanisms of war by taking appropriate account of signs and symbols.

At the end of the Cold War, many people believed that if peace was not sure, at least war would be restricted by two trends: the conversion of the planet or of a majority of its inhabitants to democratic values (people have not stopped repeating since Kant that republics do not go to war with each other)²¹ and the immense superiority of the superpower. Those are certainly factors that militate against conventional conflicts between nation-states. However, that new fact has not prevented the discovery of new frailties that are open to exploitation by aggressors, the increase in the range of reasons, including ideological, for going to war, or the spread of technologies that can be used in new forms of conflict. The dream is of an international order maintained by an international police force, which is, if possible, virtuous and altruistic. However, war – or conflict – tends to break out of its classic mould and all boundaries²² in every meaning of the word: limits in time and space, the limitations of the traditional instruments of war as well as the borders that used to separate war from other forms of political, economic or ideological conflict. War is becoming hybrid, but that is no reason to give up trying to understand it.

20 Myriam Klinger, *Héritage et actualité de la polémologie*, Téraèdre, 2007; see also F. B. Huyghe, *Anthologie de textes sur la polémologie*, 2008, available at www.huyghe.fr/actu_482.htm (last visited 13 February 2009); 'Polemology'; Ervin Laszlo, Linus Pauling and Chong-nyol Yu, *World Encyclopedia of Peace*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1986.

21 Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 12.

22 Lang Qiai and Xiangsui Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Pan-American Publishing Company, Panama City, 2002.