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Critique of Ontological Militarism

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War metaphors permeate the world we live in. From wildlife documentaries (natural war) to the curbing of academic freedom (war on woke), it seems that anything can be described in an essential likeness to warfare. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper investigates the ubiquity of war metaphors in critiques of violence within Critical Security Studies and International Political Sociology. The analysis focuses on three concepts recently advanced as alternatives to the shortcomings of securitization theory and its reliance on a mythological idea of liberal peace: fighting, martial politics, and struggles. The paper investigates how each of these concepts is built in relation to war metaphors and explains this as revealing of an underlying symptom, a form of ontological militarism, which these alternatives to securitization cannot properly work through. It advances the concept of ontological militarism as the attribution of heuristic privilege to war turning it into the cypher of all social relations by investment in an assumed indistinction between war/peace and war/struggle. The paper invites critiques of liberal civility in International Relations (IR) to take seriously the point whereby the resort to war metaphors becomes the symptom of an inability to escape the symbolic horizons of a violent militaristic order.

Aujourd'hui, les métaphores de la guerre sont omniprésentes. Des documentaires animaliers (guerre naturelle) aux limites de la liberté académique (guerre contre le mouvement Woke), il semblerait que l'on puisse tout décrire en comparant son essence à la guerre. En se fondant sur la psychanalyse lacanienne, cet article s'intéresse à l'omniprésence des métaphores de la guerre dans les critiques de la violence au sein des Études de sécurité critiques (ESC) et de la Sociologie politique internationale (SPI). L'analyse se concentre sur trois concepts récemment avancés comme alternatives aux défauts de la théorie de sécuritisation et sa dépendance à une idée mythologique de paix libérale : les combats, la politique martiale et la lutte. L'article examine la construction de chacun de ces concepts par rapport aux métaphores de la guerre avant d'expliquer qu'elle est révélatrice d'un symptôme sous-jacent, une forme de militarisme ontologique, que ces alternatives à la sécuritisation ne peuvent correctement résoudre. Il traite le concept de militarisme ontologique comme une attribution du privilège heuristique de la guerre. Il se transforme en code secret caché derrière toutes les relations sociales, par investissement dans une absence de distinction supposée entre guerre et paix, et guerre et lutte. L'article invite les critiques de la civilité libérale en RI à prendre au sérieux le point selon lequel le recours aux métaphores

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de la guerre devient symptomatique d'une incapacité à échapper aux horizons symboliques d'un ordre militariste violent.

Las metáforas relativas a las guerras impregnan el mundo en el que vivimos. Desde los documentales de naturaleza (guerra natural) hasta las restricciones en contra de la libertad académica (guerra contra el despertar), parece como si cualquier cosa pudiera describirse en función de una semejanza esencial con la guerra. Este artículo parte de la base del psicoanálisis lacaniano e investiga la ubicuidad de las metáforas relativas a la guerra dentro del marco de las críticas a la violencia en los Estudios Críticos de Seguridad (CSS, por sus siglas en inglés) y en la Sociología Política Internacional (IPS, por sus siglas en inglés). El análisis se centra en tres conceptos que han sido recientemente presentados como posibles alternativas a las deficiencias de la teoría de la securitización y su dependencia de una idea mitológica de la paz liberal: lucha, política marcial y dificultades. El artículo investiga la forma en que se construye cada uno de estos conceptos en relación con las metáforas de guerra y lo explica de manera que llega a revelar un síntoma subyacente, una forma de militarismo ontológico, que estas alternativas a la securitización no son capaces de procesar de la manera adecuada. El artículo presenta el concepto de militarismo ontológico como una atribución del privilegio heurístico a la guerra, de manera que lo convierte en el cifrado de todas las relaciones sociales mediante la inversión en una supuesta indistinción entre guerra/paz y guerra/lucha. El artículo invita a que las críticas al civismo liberal en las RRII presten suficiente atención al punto desde el cual el hecho de recurrir a las metáforas de la guerra se convierte en el síntoma de una incapacidad para escapar de los horizontes simbólicos de un orden militarista violento.

Introduction

The first episode of the Netflix production *Our Planet* (2019) begins with a shot following a colony of cormorants and boobies leaving their nesting site on the Peruvian coast toward the open Pacific Ocean in search of their feeding grounds. The scene unfolds when the birds reach the schools of anchovies, and a feeding frenzy ensues. In an almost choreographed fashion, and to an epic Hollywoodian soundtrack deserving of the best action films, the seabirds dive into the water, one after another. The immediately recognizable voice of David Attenborough then intervenes, translating to the audience the impactful aesthesis with the ease of all truisms said in passing: "the boobies carpet bomb the shoals" (Chapman 2019, 5:17:00).

This innocent scene might seem like an odd place to start my appraisal of recent developments in Critical Security Studies (CSS) and International Political Sociology (IPS). Nonetheless, it is precisely as a scene, in the psychoanalytical sense of a sequence capable of dramatizing the fantasies that sustain our worldview and subjectivity, that I find this innocent moment of tremendous significance (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988). I read this scene, which mobilizes a war metaphor as the register of the interplay between life and death in nature as revealing of a symptom—in the broadest sense of a repetitive compulsion that creates an inhibition—which affects theorizations of violence in International Relations (IR) and which I give the name of ontological militarism.

Critical scholars have used psychoanalysis to make sense of militarism, especially via the Žižekian conceptualization of a fantasy that structures the desire for large-scale violence. But my point differs from previous works, which saw militarism as a fantasy or frame (Ferguson 2009; Butler 2016, 6; Eastwood 2018; McIntosh 2022). What I mean by ontological militarism is something else: not one fantasy or

frame amongst many, but the organizing principle that controls which fantasies can emerge; an almost imperceptible symbolic operation that restricts the intelligibility of global experiences of violence, suffering, and dispossession via resort to war metaphors. Ontological militarism, which should be understood as the linguistic substratum that such metaphors reveal, consists, thus, of two central elements: (1) the attribution of heuristic privilege to war as an a priori of the social, that is, the cypher through which all social relations become legible; and (2) the foreclosure of alternative ontologies and forms of political action by investment in an assumed indistinction between war/peace and war/struggle. Both elements point toward the (mis)characterization of war as the principle that organizes both scholarly and activist forms of reading, interpreting, and acting upon the world. The argument is that militarism operates at a deeper ontological level than what is usually accepted in the literature, dictating the dreams one is allowed to entertain of different social realities and, most importantly, how to realize them. This paper investigates current debates in CSS and IPS to raise awareness of this problem, looking at the concepts of *fighting*, *martial politics*, and *struggles* as recently pitched alternatives to the study of (in)security. The central question is: to what extent do these concepts evidence, relate, or provide alternatives to ontological militarism? The paper provides a contribution to IPS scholarship because the origins of the subfields of CSS and IPS are intertwined, the work of the scholars cited here often crisscrosses both subfields, and many of the themes, concerns, and even ontological assumptions of the former can also be found in the latter.

The argument proceeds as follows: In the first part, I move beyond the *One Planet* scene to include other seemingly disparate scenes in order to situate the importance of ontological militarism in relation to the emergence of CSS as a subfield of IR. This part also introduces Lacan's thought on metaphors (the replacement of one signifier by another in a chain) as fundamental drivers of signification, both producers of meaning and markers of its limits in the work of symptoms. The second part turns to debates in the field of CSS, focusing on Tarak Barkawi's and Shane Brighton's call to re-center the study of war in the dual ontology of *fighting*, Alison Howell's critique of the term militarization and advancement of *martial politics*, and the call to decolonize the study of security through investment in anti-capitalist/anti-colonial *struggles* as articulated by Doerthe Rosenow and Lara Coleman. These concepts were chosen because they are influential in the field and are framed as alternatives to the underlying liberal imaginary that arguably sustains securitization theory: the myth of peace as a dimension freed from violence and suffering. The paper concludes that while all alternative concepts remain, to different degrees, invested in ontological militarism, the project to think (in)security through struggle*s* can acquire an exciting transformative potential, provided we resist the temptation to frame struggles in the language of war metaphors.

New Alternatives to the Study of Security

There is no shortage of examples of the omnipresent appeal of war metaphors as constitutive of the modern worldview. Ranging from the curbing of academic freedom to the management of public health crises; from how the coronavirus response in Britain conjured the spirit of the *blitz* to the ways in which tabloids and right-wing pundits incessantly speak of a *culture war*; from the framing of the racial and class bias of the US justice system as *lawfare* against the oppressed to Mike Davis's explanation of the results of the United States 2020 presidential elections as akin to a "civil war served cold" (2020, 29); war metaphors abound and are tossed with the same ease showed by David Attenborough's replacement of feeding with carpet bombing. Indeed, *Our Planet* seems to be a planet on which absolutely everything, irrespective of its irreducible uniqueness, and distance from the reality of the battlefield, can be described as being *just like* warfare.

As decolonial scholar Enrique Dussel once remarked, "*la guerra/war*" has long enjoyed a prominent place in the violent history of the West, from Heraclitus to Kissinger, always conceived of as "*el origen de todo*/the origin of everything" (Dussel 2011, 17). The study of political violence poses no exception to this rule. From the Hobbesian adage on anarchy to Konrad Lorenz's reference to "the glorious war-paint of coral fish" (2005, 29), one finds plentiful uses of war metaphors to render the natural and social worlds legible. CSS and IPS scholars are well aware of this fact and have copiously written about the role played by war metaphors in the justification of violence. It was precisely against the ubiquity of this linguistic recourse in domestic and foreign policy that CSS, in particular, emerged as a field of inquiry in the 1990s, disputing the "largely statist and military-oriented assumptions of traditional security studies" (C.A.S.E. Collective 2006, 448). CSS investigated the uses and abuses of the language of security in the constitution of certain objects and areas of policymaking as risky, dangerous, or pertaining to the survival of a political community. Early works were above all concerned with identifying the social construction of "an issue as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures to neutralize that threat" (Aradau 2012, 117). And in the best spirit of the Seville Statement (Adams 1989), against the assumption that war is a natural or unavoidable human affair, CSS strived to resist the securitization of politics as a means to justify the global management of lethal forces. The profuse body of literature following 9/11 exposing the war metaphors, the naturalization of violence, and horrific patterns of violations in the War on Terror is but one example of this intellectual enterprise (Neal 2006; Aradau 2007; Heath-Kelly 2010; Bell 2012; Bigo and Guittet 2011; Jackson 2012; Furtado 2015).

Without any pretensions to produce an exhaustive typology, the kinds of critique that constitute the basis of CSS could be divided into two main strands that Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen (2009) called widening or deepening moves. CSS first came into being advocating for conceptual expansion with an eye toward broadening the scopes of phenomena that fall under the remits of the security agenda and, second, via the formulation of alternative concepts capable of thinking through global violence otherwise. Although the two strands certainly overlap in time, it is possible to suggest a rough periodization. Earlier critiques of the narrow confines of the study of security focused on embracing epistemological pluralism to incorporate new forms of experiences, such as human security, environmental security, food security, and security as emancipation (Booth 1991; Campbell 1992; Jabri 1996; Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). This move intersected with different research agendas problematizing the expansion of the concept of security—e.g., through an understanding of practices of securitization—as potentially reproducing the grammars of the very military establishment and the policies that a critical move was supposed to contest (Bigo 2002), with some going as far as to contend that security was the bourgeois concept par excellence (Neocleous 2009). It is at the core of this deepening move, as potential alternatives to the study of the generative role of political violence in IR, that the concepts of "fighting," "martial politics," and "struggles" must be situated.

Listening to War Metaphors

We cannot fully scrutinize these new alternatives without first understanding the significance of war metaphors beyond, of course, the notions of instrumentality and intentionality they acquire in CSS and IPS critiques. In Lacan, metaphors appear as more than tools that can be used to legitimize a particular goal (the naturalization of violence). Metaphors are the very heralds of signification, identification, and the constitution of subjectivity. By following the cautious guidance of Yannis Stavrakakis (1999) and keeping a healthy degree of separation between psychoanalysis and po-

litical theory, we could use a couple of Lacanian insights to dig deeper into the political work of war metaphors and the problem of ontological militarism.

Lacan's view of the work of metaphors in the process of signification, and therefore in the constitution of subjectivity as essentially split, is perhaps best explained in his seminars on the psychoses (1955–1956), *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud* (1957), and in the short reply to Chaïm Perelman titled *Metaphor of the Subject* (1961). Long story told short, metaphors were for Lacan much more than simple allegorical devices, and together with the figure of metonym constituted the main culprits of meaning-making. Only the metaphorical "substitution of one signifier for another in a chain" (Lacan 2006, 756), as in carpet bombing for feeding, can produce the illusion of stable meaning by crossing the resistance of what he conceptualizes as the real (*réel*) to its inscription into a symbolic order. Metaphors produce a "poetic spark" (Ibid., 423)—in the classic sense of *poiesis* as a creative or generative art—putting the *things we cannot quite put into words* into a meaningful construction within reach for the subject. For example, he contends that the work of substitution operated in the utterance "Love is a pebble laughing in the sun,' recreates love in a dimension that I have said strikes me as tenable, as opposed to its ever imminent slippage" (Ibid., 423). It is, according to Lacan, through the poetic work of metaphors that human beings qua speaking-beings (*parlêtres*), that is, as essentially conditioned by the linguistic field, come to understand themselves, their place in the world and their purpose, in other words, acquire subjectivity. Lacan speaks of subjectivity and not identity because subjects can only come into being in a fundamental relationship of alienation with themselves; the stories we imagine, tell, and hear about ourselves never truly match our lived experience (if by that we conceived of a pre-linguistic domain). The spark of meaning that metaphors produce is, like all sparks, short-lived.

This fundamental alienation as the truth of the subject, as Lacan dubbed it, was for him the most important finding of the Freudian revolution; that at the core of the ego—long conceptualized in Western thought as an autonomous agency—we find the subject's subordination to a linguistic field that remains elusive and exterior to oneself. We must only think of a couple of metaphors, such as "force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one" (Marx 1990, 916) or "Latin American indigenous thought is a mine" (Mignolo cited in Grosfoguel 2016, 136, note 13), to understand how the metaphorical displacement of signifiers captures the subject into a meaningful imaginary, providing a scene in which the subject is assigned a specific role. Metaphors are, literally, the stuff we are made of—the spark that conjures up a set of relationships and social demands and captures desire, quilting our being with the fabrics of "*the Other's discourse*" (Lacan 2006, 10).

Once elevated as heralds of signification, metaphors also become the lighthouse that first signals the limits of the symbolic and the point where our capacity to understand the world fails. Crucially, metaphors play a fundamental role as the "very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense are determined" (Ibid., 431). Lacan builds on Freud's study of dreams, not as experiences that could foretell the future, but as revealing of the traumas, dilemmas, and repressed desires that constitute the subject's historicity to exemplify the relationship between metaphors and symptoms. Freud saw in the dreamwork (the cryptic illusions that substituted repressed desires in dreams) the metaphorical key to deciphering, and potentially healing, the symptoms of the neuroses affecting his patients. According to Lacan, Freud's writings enabled us to see the metaphorical displacement "[b]etween the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain" (Ibid., 431). For that very reason, one of Lacan's conceptualizations of the symptom is "a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element" (Ibid., 431).

Interestingly, Lacan's own writing is pervaded by war metaphors. He speaks of "the weapon of metonym" (Ibid., 430), buys into the weary trope of the war of the

sexes (Ibid., 417), and repeatedly frames the bind created by inter-subjectivity with reference to strategic thinking (Ibid., 436). We could say that he does so because Lacan was himself still held hostage by the language of a patriarchal and militaristic order (Preciado 2021). This is true to the point of (mis)recognizing this patriarchal and militarist language for the operative principle of language itself, evident in the fact he chose to name the Law of the Symbolic that dictates what *can and what cannot be put into words* after the paternal function (Name-of-the-Father) (Lacan 1997). War metaphors—in and beyond Lacan's work—certainly produce a spark and indeed have the power to render reality meaningful. To communicate an experience as something akin to warfare is to condense potentially overwhelming stimuli into an image that is within reach by reference to an overdetermining term capable of taming the real, even if for a short while. But the repetitive use of war metaphors, their ubiquity and sometimes intrusive appearances (even by scholars attempting to move beyond them, as we shall see), are suggestive of a very specific symptom which, in accordance with the Dussel and to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, prevents us from imagining an *hors-guerre*, a realm *outside warfare*.[1]

The Ontology of Fighting and War's Excess

The critique of ontological militarism in IR starts from the most obvious case: An open call for the re-centering of the study of war in CSS that led to the founding of the subfield of Critical War Studies (CWS). The idea for CWS first appeared in the works of Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton in the early 2010s. In a series of co-authored and single-authored pieces, the founders of CWS denounced the absence of an academic discipline devoted to warfare in the social sciences. Somewhat echoing Arendt's complaint in the 1970s about a mismatch between the abundant interest in violent phenomena in society and academia and the lack of theorizations of violence as a concept (Arendt 1970), and Keane's exact same complaint voiced some 30 years later (Keane 1996), Barwaki and Brighton condemned the paucity of genuine interest in the phenomenon of war in academia, or rather, of something they called "was as such" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 135). To be clear, they never claimed that no one had ever studied warfare, only that the centrality of war as "an event of ontological significance for politics and society" (Ibid., 134) had been long neglected by the interdisciplinary analyses focusing merely on war's consequences. It was this centrality that they wished to achieve in the new field of "war centered war studies" (Ibid., 129).

Barkawi and Brighton give two reasons for the neglect they identify and condemn, one historical and another epistemological. Historically, the founders of CWS situated the neglect of *war as such*, in its ontological significance as "a generative force like no other" (Ibid., 126) both in the longue durée and in the contemporary scene. The ideological underpinnings of the Enlightenment and the myth of civility, or the belief that violence would be naturally controlled with the development of civilization, are the prime culprits for the historical absence of a war-centered war studies department. By the time the social sciences were being institutionalized into self-contained academic disciplines in the nineteenth century, the argument goes, most Western intellectuals believed that warfare had its days counted as a social fact. This initial oversight, a kind of original sin that still plagues academia, was made worse by the expansion of the study of security in the twentieth century. Barkawi argues that the development of CSS—by which he means mostly securitization theory—was predicated on an earlier expansion of the use of the word security in all aspects of social policy in the post-war years. According to him, the widening move described by Buzan and Hansen in the 1990s could not have happened without the

[1] This is a reference to Derrida's controversial radicalization of social constructionism in the saying *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* [there is no outside the text]. See Derrida (1997).

prior expansion of the concept of security done by policymakers from the 1950s onwards, who extracted the term from military affairs, decoupled it from its original meaning of strategic concerns, and re-applied to "nearly every area of public policy" (Barkawi 2011, 702). In a remarkable passage, Barkawi cites Arnold Wolfers' skepticism toward the expansion of the term security (1952, 481), criticizing the new security experts "[w]ith minors in the philosophy of inquiry" (Ibid., 703), and no understanding of "weapons systems or military operations" (Ibid., 703) that "securitization theory has helped to spawn" (Ibid., 703).

But historical events are only partially to blame. According to the founders of CWS, war is by nature an elusive phenomenon, hard to grasp in its specificity and near impossible to fix in its limits and contours. War is presumed to suffer from an incredible duality that is difficult to resolve: It is both deeply historical, subjected to an existence in time that profoundly affects its contextual unfolding (we speak of this war or that war), and also transcendental, as all wars are connected by an essence that defies time itself (it is this essence, *war as such,* that they seek to define). Barkawi and Brighton advocate for an ontology of war that centers on its most fundamental element: *fighting*. What they call fighting is not to be reduced to the kinetic exchanges in the heat of battle and should instead be seen as something that reveals the intimate nature of warfare, its "excess" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 132) and "generative power" (Ibid., 127). For them, fighting always entails the question of "how to survive and prevail" (Ibid., 135). It is essentially defined by the interface between profound uncertainties (it is unpredictable) and a tremendous potential for historical and social transformations (it can reshape the world as we know it). This dual quality of fighting turns war into "a destroyer and maker of truths" (Ibid., 187), subverting the certainties of peacetime, alienating human beings, and destroying and re-creating certainties, values, and political hierarchies. CWS disputes common characterizations of warfare as simply destructive, advancing an understanding of how fighting sets into motion a series of dynamics that spill over the front cementing the basis on which new political orders will emerge. In their view, war is more like a blender: dragging in the most different objects by its tremendous centripetal force and, sure, tearing them apart, but only to pour out a new primordial soup in the other end, which will constitute the raw material of a new society.

Nowhere is this idea of war as a generative affair clearer than in what Barkawi and Brighton defined as *war's excess*. They do not speak of excesses in the usual meaning of atrocities, but in the sense "that warfare shapes the social relations in which it is embedded" (Ibid., 132). *War as such*, defined by the dual ontology of fighting as an uncertain and transformative force, cannot be restricted to the battlefield or any specific historical instantiations (this war). Rather, they contend, war is shown to be "present beyond the war front and beyond wartime, in and among apparently pacific social, cultural, and economic relations" (Ibid., 132). Only by accepting the omnipresence and omnipotence of fighting can CSS scholars understand "the intimacy between the battlefield and the wider social, political, and cultural field war helps constitute" (Ibid., 187). The ontological significance of fighting teaches an important lesson: We have been misled by the legacy of the Enlightenment and our liberal sensitivities. What we call peace is, in fact, pervaded by "veiled traces and effects of fighting—an order of battle traduced through civic transformation, but an order of battle nonetheless" (Ibid., 139).

Barkawi's and Brighton's project raises several questions, but I will not double critiques that have already been eloquently made elsewhere (Aradau 2012, 122). I will instead focus on the important but almost imperceptible consequences of the authors' deep investment in ontological militarism or the commitment to make peace like war. First, the fine line between historicity and transcendentality, which Barkawi and Brighton take to reveal something special about war, is not particular to warfare per se, but represents the central concern of metaphysics and the challenges of rep-

resentational practice, affecting even banal everyday concepts whose importance is never discussed. Critical scholars with minors (or majors) in philosophical inquiry have long debated the unbridgeable gap between the universal and the particular; that we can speak of a transcendental essence connecting all cats in history (cats as such) and that we can also speak of this cat or that particular cat, there remaining something in the former that betrays the uniqueness, individuality, and historicity of the latter. But I am yet to read an argument positing cats as the cypher of all social relations.

Perhaps more importantly, the central argument regarding war's excess relies on the alleged dual ontology of fighting as both uncertain and generative, which relies heavily on the poetic spark of war metaphors. Because fighting is the central element of war, and because it is contingent and generative, the argument goes, then the fact that human affairs showcase contingency and malleability can be said to reveal the underlying traces of fighting, and peace can be said to correspond to a silent state of war. This is a clear and powerful argument, but one subjected to two issues. First, the whole argument relies on a fundamental metonymic dislocation triggered by the metaphorical spark, whereby the part (fighting) comes to replace the whole (war) in a cascade of substitutions—fighting is then replaced by uncertainty and change—producing a sanitized understanding of war and the battlefield, devoid of the other nasty, horrible, gory parts that would disturb the structure of the militaristic metaphor *peace = war*.

Second, and more importantly, we could just as easily flip their logic around the edges. We could, for instance, take Hannah Arendt's point that both unpredictability and change are fundamental elements of human life, or of the forms of *vida activa* (labor, work, and action). In fact, Arendt goes as far as to suggest that humanity has shown such a degree of malleability and adaptation to the point of calling into question that something such as human nature exists beyond a defined human condition, which she attempts to outline (Arendt 1998). Of course, war, as something pertaining to the realm of human things, would showcase both characteristics that so intimately mark the human condition. It is here that the metaphorical spark produced by Barkawi and Brighton blinds us to a very important political operation: The return to Heraclitus' claim that war stands as "the father of all" (Heraclitus cited in Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 126) is not an analytical move but a performative one, elevating war into the Name-of-the-Father, the regulative principle dictating the inscription of experience and the foundation of subjectivity into a symbolic order. What they do when they identify uncertainty and transformation as the foundational pillars of an ontology of "war as such"—this elusive concept that is studied nowhere, but which leaves traces everywhere—is not, as they claim, to identify the ontological essence of war as much as to artificially turn war into the essence of all things.

Form Militarization to Martial Politics

Barkawi and Brighton are not alone in their characterization of the field of security studies. Anna Stavrianakis also identifies a progressive loss of interest in the study of militarism and processes of militarization in IR in the 1990s in her work with Jan Selby (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012). They too suggest that the widening move of securitization theory displaced the once unquestionable concerns of the discipline during the cold war. Problems such as the pervasiveness of belligerent values, the arms race, and civic–military relations were progressively sidelined as outdated and out of line with the shifting faces of new security risks in the new millennium (Ibid.). But instead of Barkawi's dismissal of the new security experts, we find in her analysis, co-written with Maria Stern, a more careful and contained diagnosis that albeit the critical wave might have "opened up our thinking" (Stavrianakis and Stern 2018, 4)

it unfortunately "fixed less sustained attention on the question of militarism" (Ibid., 4).

According to Stavrianakis and Selby, it was up to feminists to keep the flames of the study of militarism—conceptualized as "war-making [. . .] war-preparation" (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012, 8) or "the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of organized political violence" (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012, 3)—alive in IR (Joana and Mérand 2014; Mabee and Vucetic 2018; Rossdale 2019). It is unsurprising that feminists, always aware of the generative force of violence (Wilcox 2015) and of the intricate ways in which violence is normalized and hidden from sight behind seemingly harmless social practices, would take the lead in critiques of processes of militarisation. Their commitment to questioning the arbitrariness of the distinction between public and private placed them in a privileged position to investigate the ways in which society is mobilized in its most capillary ends, to use a Foucauldian expression, toward the general war effort. From the heydays of Cynthia Enloe's classic *Maneuvers* (2000), feminist critiques of militarism successfully led to the founding of Critical Military Studies (CMS), intent on tackling the normalization of political violence by taking "military power as a question, rather than taking it for granted" (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1). It is in the context of this rich universe of interdisciplinary reflections on how the normalization of warfare permeates the lives of women and men (Masters 2009; Åhäll 2016; Welland 2021; Massey 2022), requires the symbolic and material labor of feminized bodies (Basham and Catignani 2018), and affects rituals of mourning and remembrance (Shepherd 2007; Basham 2016; Butler 2016) that a recent debate over the validity of the concept of militarization began.

In the highly influential paper *Forget "Militarization,"* Alison Howell argued against unreflective uses of the term militarization. After criticizing the relative lack of theorization of the concept even amongst the feminist vanguard, Howell takes issues with the opening paragraph of Enloe's *Maneuvers* where a can of soup with tiny little pasta shapes in the liking of weapons from the franchise *Star Wars* is used to illustrate how militarism colonizes everyday life in almost imperceptible ways. Making use of a wide body of literature on police power, carcerality, post-colonial theory, and the latest racial "turn" in IR, Howell weaves a powerful argument against the concept of militarization as reducing political violence to a "process by which the exception (war) encroaches on the norm (peace)" (Howell 2018, 118). Echoing the founders of CWS, Howell argues that critiques of militarization such as Enloe's misjudge "the extent to which we live with war" (Ibid., 119). Furthermore, Howell frames her critique of militarzation as a powerful reminder of the limits of (white) feminist critique. For her, "by holding the categories of the military and of the social (or, war and peace) as separate until "militarization" happens, the concept implicitly presumes a status prior to militarization" (Ibid., 120). This presumption, the argument goes, reinforces white liberal imaginaries that violence and politics (or at least politics as white feminist scholars know it) are somehow antagonistic spheres.

Howell then moves away from what she deems the concerns of white feminists whose work crisscrosses CSS and IPS toward the everyday realities of racialized communities. She intends to build an agenda for the study of security that does justice to the lives of those for whom there is neither a sense of exception nor an outside to the violence of white supremacist rule; those who live in the margins of the polis, at the point where the intersection of class, racial, and gender hierarchies construes "war-like (martial) forms of politics" (Ibid., 119), where the risk of being violated is ever-present and indissociable from any sense of normality. Attributing heuristic privilege to their reality—or her depiction thereof—she presents the concept of *martial politics*, which "denotes that a thing is war-like, or that it derives from battle, war, or the military—that it is 'of war'" (Ibid., 121) as a substitute for militarization.

Howell's critique has been influential for a reason. The concept of *martial politics*, however broad it may be, shares the potential of CWS's idea of *fighting*, that is, the potential to reject liberal fantasies of peace and civility as freed from suffering, conflict, and dispossession which are often oblivious to the formative/productive role of violence in the modern/colonial world, while at the same time adding an extra dimension; an important anti-racist ethos and methodological commitment to the subaltern that is missing from CWS. All of this comes across powerfully in her work, sometimes at great cost to herself and her collaborators (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 8). And it is exactly because of this ethos, because of the commendable political commitment to resist the violence of the modern colonial world that the reliance on war metaphors and the investment in ontological militarism appear so disturbingly out of place in her writing.

At the heart of the concept of martial politics is the structure of a war metaphor, a claim concerning "the indivisibility of war and peace, military, and civilian, and national and social security" (Howell 2018, 118). As with the ontology of fighting in CWS, Howell's notion of the martial—of the indistinct gray zone between militarism and non-militarism—elevates the idea or principle of warfare to the archaeological substratum of all social relations.[2] A lot of the potency of her argument relies on the identification of a militaristic or war-like origin behind the mundane and everyday objects and institutions often assumed to have no relationship with the battlefield. Her problem with Enloe's can of soup is precisely that tinned food was never at any point militarized; it always belonged to the military domain in the sense it originated from the logistic concerns for sustaining troops during the long Napoleonic campaigns. The argument is repeated in relation to two other institutions, the police and the university, which are also shown to have originated in and connived with the war effort long before this symbiosis was ever critiqued by Feminist Security Studies. In sum, if we scratch the surface of peaceful things, we find a military beginning somewhere.

There are two problems with this logic. The first one is that simply stated, the concept of martial politics is made of an inverted teleology whereby origins dictate both the current political function and the role played by things in the present. But this assumption is misleading because it ignores the diachronic dimension of life or the fact that *origins do not dictate endings* (either as outcomes or purpose). For instance, Anthropology's birth was indissociable from the colonial project of counting and controlling non-European peoples. Nonetheless, just as I do not write this paper in the language I was taught at birth, Global South Anthropologists, like Lélia Gonzalez, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Rita Segato, have produced some of the most poignant critiques of the de-facto or epistemological subjugation of non-Europeans. Perhaps even a can of soup, once conceived as a cog in the large-scale infliction of death and horror, can end up on our dinner table, as part of the ethics of care and nurturing life instead. There is nothing pre-determined here.

But the ontological militarism present in Howell's characterization of political life is also disturbing for another more problematic reason. It is unsettling to see how the claim of an indistinction between war and peace in the writings of an irreproachable anti-colonial scholar can be matched, almost verbatim, to the writings and documents of military strategists of the twenty and twenty-first centuries. I am thinking of the doctrines of French colonial counterinsurgency produced in the 1950s, a period of intellectual "rediscovery" of Lyautey's *Du Role Coloniale de l'Arme* by veterans of Vietnam/Indochina (1946–1954) some of whom would later serve in Algeria (1954–1962) and actively lobbied for the radicalization of the French response. The writings of Roger Trinquier, Jacques Hogard, Charles Lacheroy, and Jean Némo on the so-called doctrines of *action psychologique* and *guerre révolutionnaire* already showed a disturbing similarity with what Barkawi, Brighton, Howell,

[2] A point also recognized by Nisha Shah in MacKenzie et al. (2019).

and many others see as the indistinction between war and peace, internal and national security, and social and military policy. For the French soldier-scholars, the advent of the communist movement profoundly transformed the nature of warfare. Hogard, for one, claimed that since the October Revolution "war had become permanent, universal, and truly 'total'" (Hogard cited in Finch 2018, 420) to the point that a "'state of peace' no longer exists" (Ibid., 423). The obvious conclusion was that "political and military activities are now closely interlinked down to the lowest levels" (Ibid., 423), which multiplied possible battlefields turning every social interaction into a potential front. While I agree that it would be foolish to suggest that the doctrine of *guerre révolutionnaire* somehow "militarized" the French military, it is generally accepted that it represented a radicalization or foreclosure of pre-existing or alternative modes of understanding political events and responding to them. The spark of the war metaphor, which made an otherwise unintelligible anti-colonial resistance meaningful to military strategists also blurred any potential lines delimiting the possibility of an *hors-guerre* and may have played a role in the radicalization[3] of the horrors described by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). The reach of their writings went well beyond the frontiers of the Francophone world, instructing and inspiring generations of soldier-scholars and policymakers in the horrific manhunt of terrorists and subversives, from Argentina to Afghanistan (McSherry 2005; Owens 2015; Furtado 2022b).

This is not meant to be an indictment of the concept of *martial politics*, which could only be a facile indictment, as the same as historical right-wing military extremism. Howell's work, more so than CWS, is obviously and clearly positioned as far away as possible from the likings of Hogard, Trinquier, and Lacheroy and their criminal disciples, who tortured and assassinated political dissidents. But it does speak to a problem of formulating alternative understandings of (in)security without tapping into a gird of intelligibility shared with the most radicalized minds of a militaristic and violent order. To put it clearly, the comparison here only serves the purpose of highlighting the existence of a point whereby our political commentary is voiced through the discourse of a horrific Other. I take the adverb *our* seriously here, as I also face this problem in my own work. There is a point, which is not always clear and easy to identify, where the potency of war metaphors risks capturing our imagination, producing a description of social reality in a relation of disconcerting likeness with the fantasies of torture advocates.

Thinking through Struggles for a Decolonial Future, with a Caveat

The concepts of *fighting* and the *martial* were immersed in wider IR debates, concerning the discipline's difficulty in coming to terms with its colonial/imperial past and current Eurocentrism and commitment to methodological whiteness. Barkawi and Howell's further interventions, and those of their collaborators, have made important contributions to these debates, and it is within the orbit of these questions that the present and future of critical investigations of security in IR must be considered (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Barkawi 2016; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2018). It is also in relation to these debates that we find the advancement of an ontological commitment to *struggles* as a recent and ambitious alternative to the concept of security.

The call to re-think (in)security through the concept of struggle is found in the work of Lara Coleman and Doerthe Rosenow. Much in line with CWS and CMS, they too criticize CSS and IPS scholars[4] as maintaining an excessively conservative

[3]The infamous Lacheroy, for example, was a member of the Organization Armée Secrète (OAS) responsible for unleashing a wave of terror onto supporters of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and was condemned to capital punishment for his role in the failed military coup against de Gaulle in 1961 (Finch 2018).

[4]See Dillon and Reid (2001), Dillon (2007), Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero (2008), Dillon and Neal (2008), and Aradau and van Munster (2009).

tone vis-a-vis the traditional ideas of what counts as violence. For Coleman, despite rightfully moving "beyond 'security' (narrowly conceived)" (Montesinos Coleman 2021, 72), critical scholarship continued to reproduce the basic assumptions held by military strategists and the ensuing analytical focus on practices "expressly directed toward managing threat, risk, disruption, and vulnerability" (Ibid., 72). In conversation with Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit's ground-breaking and ego-shaking critiques of CSS and Foucauldian security studies (which remain influential in IPS) as invested in anti-Black racism and methodological whiteness, Coleman proposes an alternative understanding of (in)security that takes heed of decolonization both envisioned as an epistemological and political commitment.

Together with Rosenow, they contend that the possibility of a decolonized future for CSS, one that we can imagine decidedly excises the problems identified by Howell and Richter-Montpetit, can only come from investment in *struggles*, which they define as "situated practices of social and/or political mobilization against injurious logics of oppression, exclusion, or exploitation" (Montesinos Coleman and Rosenow 2016, 205). The argument is built in part on Coleman's previous and extensive engagement with the activism of Colombian peasants—in particular the Colombian Foodworkers' Union—who denounced the complicity of international corporations such as Coca-Cola and British Petroleum in the murders of anti-capitalist activists by paramilitaries drawing the attention of the People's Permanent Tribunal. Coleman and Rosenow argue that struggles such as those of the Foodworkers' Union reveal the limitations of CSS and push for the recognition of "the means of naturalizing violence and neutralizing struggle that are invisible within the Security frame" (Ibid., 211) and "within the civic peace" (Ibid., 210).

However exciting Coleman and Rosenow's call might be, the commitment to think through struggles is not in itself an insurance policy against ontological militarism. Struggles, as it were, also need to be inscribed in a symbolic order, mobilize signifiers, and produce metaphorical sparks that both define and delimit their contours, content, means, and ends. Those who join the struggle must take on the role of representatives, not only in the sense of speaking on behalf of others but also, and more importantly, in the sense of inscribing the suffering they actively give voice to as suffering that matters and must be addressed. In other words, to make themselves heard—translating needs into demands—they may often need to speak the language of a political and legal order that retains an unavoidable element that remains, in all senses, foreign to themselves, and thoroughly complicit in their alienation.

Coleman and Rosenow are of course aware of the perils of reproducing violent worldviews (Ansems de Vries et al. 2017), yet, in a passing slip, they also end up tapping into the gird of intelligibility provided by ontological militarism, with a mention of the "silent war" (Montesinos Coleman and Rosenow 2016, 209) waged within the normality of "civil peace" (Ibid., 209). This slip, which this article names ontological militarism, has long haunted the history of anti-capitalist/anti-colonial struggles. If Patricia Owen's indictment that "Marx and his followers" showed "an inability to theorize politics as much more than the expression of violence" (2015, 19) sounds excessive, it is certainly true that the problematic of *Gewalt*, or the (il)legitimacy of violence, has always been at the center of their writings (Balibar 2009). From the ambiguous relationship with violence that Marx and Engels exhibited to Lenin's progressive acceptance of the controlled management of terror (Cohen-Almagor 1991); from Gramsci's depiction of political struggles as wars of movement or attrition to Laclau and Mouffe's antagonistic frontiers; from Fanon's call to arms to Zizek's glorification of Benjamin's divine violence, the ontological temptation to fantasize war as the (Name-of-the-)*father of all* was always present. We do not need to go as far as to conjure up the usual suspects of Stalinism, the Khmer Rouge, or Sendero Luminoso—and we certainly must not entertain the facile and dangerous fantasies of liberal horseshoe theorists and the Far-right—to take heed of

the problem at hand. I could mention the use of war metaphors not only to gather support but to bring struggles into being, in the New Left and the anti-colonial resistance of the 1960s.[5]

Historical and present-day anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles were often forced to decide, threading the tenuous line between the denunciation of a violent order and the recourse to violence in their constitution as *armed* struggles. Regardless of ethical considerations about the legitimacy/necessity of such decisions, they were never in any way or form innocent. They often entailed the foreclosure of the possibility of conceiving resistance otherwise, as illustrated by the Zapatista reduction of "500 years of struggle" to "this [armed] struggle as the only path" (Cited in Mignolo 2005, 13). When we look at the history of struggles, we can see how the mobilization of war metaphors is often accompanied by a metonymic dislocation: The sliding of the signifier to the point, sometimes almost imperceptible, where political action acquires a different "meaning" as the part (militarism) comes to replace the whole (emancipation). It is here that ontological militarism becomes properly symptomatic, inhibiting our political imagination by arresting the multiplicity of forms that resistance to collective suffering can take via resort to war as a master signifier; the only signifier capable of granting resistance any value and meaning.

To keep with the spirit of the psychoanalytic tradition—of taking seriously what is often considered banal—I will also mention a curious and much less significant, but not for that less enlightening case: The choice by the developing and marketing teams of the Jacobin magazine to name their recently commercialized tabletop game C*lass War* and not class struggle, as if there was nothing separating war from struggle. This silly example betrays the Dusselian confusion that renders political action as "*emparentada, pero distinta a la guerra [. . .] porque en la lucha y en la guerra se deben tomar decisiones instantáneas, difíciles, complejas*/related to but distinct from war [. . .] because in the struggle and war one must make instant, difficult, and complex decisions" (2012, 174). Critical scholars must do justice to Dussel's hesitation (. . .but distinct) which, like all hesitations, betrays a truth that is clearly articulated by Jacques Bidet: The fact that "the (modern class) "struggle" differs from war insofar as it refers to a possible general will, as to a "truth" to which both sides lay claim" (Bidet 2016, 176). I believe this truth can be generalized to the struggles Coleman and Rosenow have in mind and is capable of demarcating important differences with the concepts *fighting* and the *martial*. While *fighting* is described as pretraining to survival and an effort to prevail (we must add, in an almost Social-Darwinist fashion), the struggles Rosenow and Coleman speak of are neither primarily fought on a competitive or zero-sum basis (my life equals someone's death) nor targeted at anyone enemy. They are constituted as struggles against current ways of life and in the name of another possible world for the emancipation of all. These struggles cannot be reduced to being *war-like* in the sense intended by Howell because instead of the privilege granted to the principle of differentiation—something akin to "us" versus "them," which also appears in warfare—they are about revealing and foregrounding the undeniable equality of all subjects of speech (which in a capitalist and colonial order must be repressed at all costs). They pursue the emancipation of a specific group only insofar as this emancipation represents *the conditions for the emancipation of all*. This is a vital distinction, vital in the sense that it testifies to a struggle for life, for a new form of life structured by new social relations, irreducible to the idea of survival-by-killing, and whose radical plurality of forms cannot be mas-

[5]A few examples are Fanon's troubling relationship with militarism and support of violence as a cleansing force (Fanon 1963), Guevara's reduction of political action to the making of other Vietnams (Guevara 1999), and Huey P. Newton's and Carlos Marighella's depiction of their respective national police corps as colonial armies of occupation (Newton cited in Marighella 1979; Manchanda and Rossdale 2021).

tered/arrested by the signifier warfare.[6] This vital distinction is so strong that it is sustained even when these struggles eventually fall prey to ontological militarism.[7]

Thinking through struggles might not solve the problem on its own, since no struggle is immune to the temptation/practical necessity to imagine itself as a type of war or actualize its goals through war. But it does provide sketches of a way out, provided we recognize and resist the allure of ontological militarism. Coleman and Rosenow's work opens up the study of security to the intimate and "invisible" spaces where suffering becomes the raw material of the re-production of global hierarchies, which can set us on a radical path to rethink our understanding of (in)security and suffering. If we can retain this sensibility while dodging the metonymical sliding produced by ontological militarism, then CSS can be freed from the shackles of its usual starting points in the themes of survival, death, threat, and risk (the security "frame" they so eloquently critique). Investigations could begin, instead, from spaces and struggles that are not normally recognized as relevant, from the rare question of "who cleans the world" (Vergès 2021) or from the perspective of the global economy of convenience (Furtado 2022a). This would certainly open up the decolonial potential of revealing and foregrounding the "plurality and movement of lived thought as it is developed by intervening in the world and trying to change it" (Montesinos Coleman 2021, 75) beyond a patriarchal-militaristic idea of how change is to be enacted.

Conclusion

I would like to end on a cautionary note in lieu of a conclusion. Critical scholarship, whether in CSS or IPS, must beware of the point where our critiques of violence become symptomatic of an inability to escape the symbolic horizons of a violent militaristic order—of reading violence and suffering otherwise. The liberal mythology that silences the everyday violence and suffering required for the reproduction of the international system must be resisted, but war metaphors, however tempting they may be, can only force us into an intellectual and practical cul-de-sac. To break free from the shackles of ontological militarism, we must remember the vital distinction that *our struggle* is carried out in the name of life, *wars*, whatever generative power we may wish to grant them, in the name of death.

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[6] I second here Silvia Frederici's rebuttal of the Marxian metaphor rendering force as the midwife of political change: "midwives bring life into the world, not destruction" (2004, 118, note 10). In other words, while in struggles the element of destruction may play an accidental role (e.g., armed struggles), it has an essential function in warfare.

[7] Take, for example, Amilcar Cabral's vow, amid the struggle for the liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, to fight "without ever confusing the people of Portugal and Portuguese colonialism" (Cabral 1973, 11). Even though Cabral spoke from the position of a subject invested in an armed struggle, there is something in his words that cannot be reduced to and remains at odds with the militaristic option (see also note 6).

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