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Clausewitz: On strategy

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What can we learn from the detailed exegesis of Carl von Clausewitz for the study of strategy? Based on a detailed reading of Clausewitz' book *On War*, this paper proposes that Clausewitz' reflections on strategy unfold along two parallel arguments. First, he explores the principal difficulties of a positive theory of strategy. This critical inquiry shows how quantities and qualities influence each other in war; how events emerge rather uncontrollably from the interplay of action and reaction; and how the fog of war puts a veil of uncertainty over all information. Clausewitz's fundamental critique leads him to the conclusion that a normative theory of strategy is impossible. Clausewitz' second stream of thought investigates how strategy could be studied instead. On the one hand – and based on his famous dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means – he suggests understanding strategy as a socio-political (rhetorical) mechanism through which people can be convinced in deliberations about a specific course of action. On the other hand, Clausewitz also reflects on the pedagogy of strategy. He concludes that theory may be useful to educate the mind of the future leader, but not to accompany him on the battlefield. The contribution this paper hopes to make to *The Age of Strategy: Exploring the Cultural, Organizational, and Political Dimensions of Strategy* is twofold: first, the study of Clausewitz represents a contribution to the study of the history of strategic thought. The second contribution is aimed at the relation between strategy as theory and practice. Following Raymond Aron's suggestion, *On War* does not offer a normative doctrine but rather a critical theory that equips the student of strategy to understand the task at hand 'without entertaining any absurd claim to communicate the secret of victory.'

Keywords: Clausewitz; strategy; organization; war; power; Foucault

Introduction

This paper sets out to answer the following question: what can we learn from rereading Clausewitz' *On War* for the study of strategy? Such an undertaking appears to be worthwhile, as most strategists are acquainted with Clausewitz yet only few seem to engage with his thoughts more thoroughly. In fact, *On War* enjoys a strange popularity within the field of strategy and is quite at home in the business sections of airport bookshops. More academically-oriented publications, however, tend to ignore Clausewitz' book. But perhaps both the academic silence and the practitioner's affirmative embrace of Clausewitz should be treated with suspicion. Rather, there is a subtler, more nuanced and perhaps more sceptical current that flows through *On War*, which offers a deep understanding of the intricate ontology of war and some profound epistemological insights into the ambiguities and fallacies of information gathering, decision making and strategising. It presents a powerful stream of thoughts that overflow

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and undermine the narrow confines of instrumental rationality that are characteristic of most current strategy thinking.

The exegesis of Clausewitz' *oeuvre* provides two insights that might be of value for the student of strategy. First, this study of Clausewitz represents a contribution to the study of the history of strategic thought. As Hoskin et al. (2006, 167) pointedly argued, 'much conventional analysis of strategy [...] is misdirected because it has as yet no proper understanding of the *history* of strategy'. They contend that strategy scholars suffer from a 'kind of general historical amnesia' which results in a 'shared ahistoricism' (2006, 184). Perhaps strategy practitioners may be excused, as they are so busily concerned with the future that there is little time left to think of the past. Yet strategy scholars who ignore the history of their subject may misinterpret the relation between contemporary strategy discourse, its power effects and deeper societal transformations. Reading Clausewitz means going back to a point in the history of ideas where strategy formed out of the concern for the possibility of a rational conduct of action in an environment where action, anticipated reaction and the ongoing calculation of their interplay made prediction (and legitimacy) of interventions problematic.

Second, Clausewitz offers an alternative pedagogy of strategy. As military educator of the young Prussian crown prince, and as military officer and general, he reflects on the use and disadvantage of strategy in life. His conclusions seem rather novel: he suggests using theory to educate the mind of the future leader but not to accompany him on the battlefield. In the words of Aron (1983, viii), author of a seminal book on Clausewitz' thinking, *On War* does not offer a doctrine but rather a theory 'which would teach the strategist to understand his task without entertaining any absurd claim to communicate the secret of victory'. Hence the second contribution this paper aims to make is towards the relation between strategy as theory and practice.

A close reading of *On War* does not bring to the fore Clausewitz the advisor, the master of strategy and tactics who offers truths on how to conduct war, but Clausewitz the pragmatist, the critic who weighs with care each word with which he describes strategy, as if he would send words like troops into battle. Methodologically, this warrants that the interpretation put forward in the paper has to remain close to the original text. The paper is structured as follows: first, it examines what Clausewitz termed the 'principal difficulty of a positive theory of strategy'. Three fundamental questions (*How to account for quantities and qualities? How to cope with reactivity? How to know in the midst of the fog of war?*) articulate Clausewitz' argument that a positive theory of strategy resembles nothing more than, as he puts it, 'the horrid dreams of generalization'. In the second part, this paper explores how strategy could be studied alternatively. Consonant with Clausewitz, this paper suggests that strategy should be investigated in its relation to society, power and history, resulting in a critical approach. Furthermore, this paper discusses how critical strategy neither judges nor guides practice normatively but fulfils a different, precise and valuable function for practice. It concludes with a short vignette from the Cuban Missile Crisis, which illustrates how a Clausewitz-inspired notion of strategy could be utilised empirically, and a short reflection on the implications for future studies in strategy, organization and society.

On the principal difficulty of a theory of strategy

Clausewitz' afterlife

Published posthumously in 1832 by his widow Marie von Clausewitz, *On War* is the result of Clausewitz' thinking over more than three decades, a time during which he served as

a military officer, experienced several war battles, worked as a military educator to the Prussian Crown prince and acted as director of the military academy, *Allgemeine Kriegsschule*, in Berlin. Dissatisfied with existing theories of war and increasingly disgruntled with his formal positions, he set out to develop a comprehensive analytics of war. By the time of his death in 1831 the project had grown into an assemblage of books, essays, sketches, fragments and notes (see [Aron, 1983](#)). During his lifetime, he only published anonymously several short commentaries. Quietly, his major work, *On War*, took shape in private. Clausewitz was fully aware that he would not see through its publication during his lifetime; he must have felt confident that the manuscripts he entrusted his wife in a sealed box would find a growing readership after his death.

Indeed, some writers are born posthumously, as Nietzsche once remarked. While possibly true in other fields, Clausewitz' reincarnation in business school strategy departments has yet to take place.¹ From the outset, the study of strategy that proliferated in business schools from the mid-twentieth century onwards (see [Carter et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2010](#)) was characterised by an ambiguous relationship with Clausewitz' opus. On the one hand, practitioners and those who write for them display an affectionate fondness towards the Prussian general. However superficial their engagement with Clausewitz, they adopt him as an intellectual father figure. For instance, the Boston Consulting Group, not normally known for having an overly philosophical approach, compiled a 'best of Clausewitz' edition of *On War*. In the introduction the editors ask why Clausewitz' work is of relevance for today's strategist and argue that Clausewitz 'can speak the executive's mind because it is his own' (2001, 6). Alongside Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, Clausewitz' book is framed as systematic, practice-based analysis of strategy mastering real world events. Of course, by sketching their intellectual trajectory backwards to Clausewitz and beyond, contemporary strategists can claim foundations of their discipline that transcend the numerical monotony of Excel spread sheets, the simplicity of 2 × 2 matrices and rather biblical metaphors such as that of blue and red oceans (see [Kornberger, 2012](#); [Kurunmäki and Miller, 2013](#)).

On the other hand, and not without irony, the scholarly discussions about strategy remain silent on Clausewitz. Unsurprisingly, the predominantly North American, economics-inspired strategy theory, with its focus on firm performance, generally ignores Clausewitz (see [Nag et al., 2007](#); [Furrer et al., 2008](#)). Strangely, the more social science- and organizationally-oriented studies on strategy usually do not engage with Clausewitz' thoughts either. For instance, widely used textbooks such as Johnson et al.'s *Exploring Corporate Strategy* (2008) do not find Clausewitz worth a mention. Recent handbooks that claim to provide a comprehensive survey of the field and map out possible future developments do not see Clausewitz as part of their intellectual past or future. For example, the *Handbook of Strategy and Management* edited by [Pettigrew et al. \(2002\)](#) does not reference Clausewitz, nor does the *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice* ([Golsorkhi et al., 2010](#)). The lacuna becomes particularly obvious when the chapters on the history and the evolution of strategy in both handbooks remain silent on Clausewitz' contribution (see [Ericson and Melin, 2010](#); [Bowman et al., 2002](#); [Jeremy, 2002](#)). Even accounts of strategy that brand themselves as alternative, such as Cummings' *ReCreating Strategy* (2002), explicitly historical (e.g. [Hoskin et al., 2006](#)), or critical (e.g. [Knights and Morgan, 1991](#)) fall short of mobilising *On War* as a discursive resource against mainstream strategy research. These critical works have emerged in response to the functionalist accounts of strategy and seek to highlight the unintended and potentially negative effects of strategy. They remain, as an extension of the critical (management studies) project, tied to the concept of strategy they seek to critique. In their view, strategy

is not (only) a means to increase firm performance, but (also) a technology of domination and control (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Consequently, Clausewitz' writing, to date, has not inspired strategy writers to develop alternative approaches.

In sum, the field of strategy follows an instrumental rationality that is concerned with means-end relationships, intentionality and predictability of the future or the critique thereof (Clegg et al., 2004). The debates within the field circle around the influence of the environment on firm performance and the role of internal capabilities (including the ability to shape environments) and the merits of macro-analysis as opposed to the minute details of practice studies. Despite disagreements, their common denominator is to view (or criticise) strategy as a positive science that can explain and perhaps influence future performance. Clausewitz was rather sceptical about whether developing a theory of strategy is a feasible undertaking in the first place. The section in *On War* on the 'principal difficulty of a theory for the conduct of war' discusses three properties that make war resilient to general theorising.

Principal difficulty 1: how to account for quantities and qualities?

In their writings on strategy, Clausewitz' contemporaries provided laws that, if followed, would result in successful outcomes. For instance, Heinrich von Bülow's *Spirit of the System of Modern Warfare* (1805) suggested a form of geometric dogmatism in which the geometric set up of the troops should determine a battle's outcome (Aron, 1983, 45). Based on his own experience, Clausewitz refuted such theorems as trivial. War is more complex, he insisted: its 'first speciality' is that it is not only determined by physical quantities (such as distribution of people in space) but that it depends largely on 'moral forces and their effects'. Consequently, he refutes attempts to develop a theory of war as 'unserviceable' because military action deals with material *and* living forces:

All these attempts at theory are only to be considered in their analytical part as progress in the province of truth, but in their synthetical part, in their precepts and rules, they are quite unserviceable. They strive after determinate quantities, whilst in war all is undetermined, and the calculation has always to be made with varying quantities. They direct the attention only upon material forces, while the whole military action is penetrated throughout by intelligent forces and their effects. They only pay regard to activity on one side, whilst war is a constant state of reciprocal action, the effects of which are mutual. (71)²

Decisive 'intelligent forces' such as the morale of the troops or motivation defy quantification and calculation. These forces remain undetermined, yet they have a major impact on the force of observable quantities: what do the number of troops or canons reveal if their actual effectiveness is a function of a quality impossible to account for, such as courage or morale? Clausewitz saw Napoleon and Friedrich II winning battles against armies that outsized them in numbers; but obviously, the outcome of a battle results from the mobilisation of people and resources, and what in want of a better word is termed their morale. Hence Clausewitz concluded that the different qualities and quantities form the basic elements of the conduct in war. Clausewitz introduces the notion of 'friction' to elaborate on the relation between these elements. Even seemingly minute objects are equipped with powers to disrupt the military machinery:

Friction is the only conception which in a general way corresponds to that which distinguishes real war from war on paper. The military machine, the army and all belonging to it, is in fact simple, and appears on this account easy to manage. But let us reflect that no part of it is in one piece, that it is composed entirely of individuals, each of which keeps up its own friction in all directions. Theoretically all sounds very well: the commander of a battalion is responsible for the execution of the order given; and as the battalion by its discipline is glued together into one

piece, and the chief must be a man of acknowledged zeal, the beam turns on an iron pin with little friction. But it is not so in reality, and all that is exaggerated and false in such a conception manifests itself at once in war. The battalion always remains composed of a number of men, of whom, if chance so wills, the most insignificant is able to occasion delay and even irregularity. (83)

The strategist deals with simplified representations of what, in reality, amounts to an assemblage of heterogeneous networks. The activities of strategists, such as moving their army, equipping troops with weapons and assessing their morale, rely entirely on abstract representations. In reality, each apparent unity is assembled and made up of myriad parts that pull in different directions, causing friction. Clausewitz stresses that it is the obscure detail, the seemingly meaningless that will shape the outcome of a battle. A theory of war would have to take into account circumstance, serendipity, chance, coincidence and all those other idiosyncratic occurrences that influence the course of events. Of course, strategists could decide to ignore the heterogeneity and complexity of reality and force their will on events. Clausewitz warns:

So in war, through the influence of an infinity of petty circumstances, which cannot properly be described on paper, things disappoint us, and we fall short of the mark. A powerful iron will overcomes this friction; it crushes the obstacles, but certainly the machine along with them. (83)

Clausewitz has Napoleon's failed Russian campaign in mind. Continuously moving backwards, the tsar gave the French troops so much space to conquer that their move forward left them exhausted and consumed. Choosing an apt metaphor, Clausewitz suggests moving through war is like walking in water. What looks simple and easy on land (or paper) turns into a strenuous activity:

Activity in war is movement in a resistant medium [...] This is the reason that the correct theorist is like a swimming master, who teaches on dry land movements which are required in the water, which must appear grotesque and ludicrous to those who forget about the water. (84)

Principal difficulty 2: how to cope with reactivity?

War consists of different elements, some quantitative (number of troops or guns) and others qualitative (morale and courage). Circumstances such as terrain and weather but also sheer luck and coincidence play an important role on the battlefield. Clausewitz analyses the relation between these elements as a 'living reaction' that adds another layer of complexity to the problem of calculation of qualitative and quantitative forces discussed above:

We do not here speak of the difficulty of estimating that reaction, for that is included in the difficulty before mentioned, of treating the moral powers as quantities; but of this, that reciprocal action, by its nature, opposes anything like a regular plan. (103)

Because of the complex interaction of qualitative and quantitative forces, and their reciprocal nature, the outcome of a battle, let alone a war, defies planning and prediction. Clausewitz identifies the preconditions under which prediction in war would be possible:

1. War becomes a completely isolated act, which arises suddenly, and is in no way connected with the previous history of the combatant states.
2. If it is limited to a single decision, or to several simultaneous decisions.
3. If it contains within itself the solution perfect and complete, free from any reaction upon it, through a calculation before-hand of the political situation which will follow from it. (26)

Of course, Clausewitz knows that none of the three simple assumptions holds true in war. War is a temporal phenomenon in which the future, the present and the past collide like tectonic plates. War is contingent on historical events which in turn colour perception and filter information. Moreover, war consists of a web of consecutive decisions that influence each other. Finally, the political realities that may result from war feed back on the conduct of war itself. For Clausewitz, war follows a paradoxically temporal logic in which the arrow of time is bent and the future has the power to shape the present: war is influenced by expectations of what might happen after it ended, which in turn influences the course of events during battle. In other words, it is the problem of self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecies that subvert strategy's linear time.

Principal difficulty 3: how to know in the midst of the fog of war?

The third and final peculiarity of war is the 'uncertainty of data' that it produces and feeds on. Clausewitz defines information as the fundamental element in war: 'By the word "information" we denote all the knowledge which we have of the enemy and his country; therefore, in fact, the foundation of all our ideas and actions' (59).

Unfortunately, the importance of information seems to be inversely related to its reliability: information is subject to frequent changes and is little trustworthy, Clausewitz writes, and hence 'we shall soon feel what a dangerous edifice war is, how easily it may fall to pieces and bury us in its ruins' (59). 'War', explains Clausewitz, 'is the province of uncertainty', and that 'three-fourths of those things upon which action in war must be based upon are hidden in the fog of a more or less great uncertainty'. Empirical illustrations of the most vivid kind are provided in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; the novel, in which Clausewitz makes an – unfavourable – appearance as a Prussian military officer, beautifully describes the fog of war and the resulting confusions and misunderstandings in the combating armies.

Yet Clausewitz' problem revolves around how to deal with the dilemma of incomplete and uncertain information. The most obvious solution would be to evaluate information carefully, treating it as hypothetical until further information falsifies or verifies its premises, and adjusting the strategy continuously. Indeed, Clausewitz considers this argument in detail:

From this uncertainty of all intelligence and suppositions, this continual interposition of chance, the actor in war constantly finds things different from his expectations; and this cannot fail to have an influence on his plans, or at least on the presumptions connected with these plans. If this influence is so great as to render the predetermined plan completely nugatory, then, as a rule, a new one must be substituted in its place; but at the moment the necessary data are often wanting for this, because in the course of action circumstances press for immediate decision, and allow no time to look about for fresh data, often not enough for mature consideration. (47)

Whilst plans become obsolete as soon as the battle starts, new plans cannot be drawn up because of missing data and a lack of time to digest the information available. Data sourcing and processing capacity put definite limits on the adjustment of plans to events. But Clausewitz goes beyond such a bounded rationality argument. He argues that information brings a second, more dangerous element into play:

But it more often happens that the correction of one premise, and the knowledge of chance events which have arisen, are not sufficient to overthrow our plans completely, but only suffice to produce hesitation. Our knowledge of circumstances has increased, but our uncertainty, instead of having diminished, has only increased. (47)

Clausewitz proposes an interesting paradox: the more we know about the ‘infinity of petty circumstances’, the more information we have at hand, the more our uncertainty will increase. In short, the amount of information available correlates positively with the level of uncertainty experienced. Every piece of information brings a detail into focus; yet the potential connections between these pieces of information explode with each new detail. Formulaically, as information increases linearly, potential relations between pieces of data explode exponentially. Hence more information produces more uncertainty.

Clausewitz identifies a third pathological dimension of information gathering. Contradictory, false and doubtful information confuse the decision-making process. Truthful information, so common sense tells, improves the quality of decision making. Clausewitz disagrees, arguing that it is much more problematic if new pieces of information arrive at the strategist’s desk, confirm each other and add up to a neat big picture:

It is much worse for the inexperienced when accident does not render him this service [conflicting information being reported from the theatre of war], but one report supports another, confirms it, magnifies it, finishes off the picture with fresh touches of colour, until necessity in urgent haste forces from us a resolution which will soon be discovered to be folly, all those reports having been lies, exaggerations, errors, etc., etc. (60)

While information increases complexity and uncertainty, those pieces of data that seemingly confirm a chosen course of action are even more problematic. They only enliven the illusion of the big picture, making the strategist forget about its aesthetic nature. An irreconcilable dilemma opens up: information is the foundation of all actions. Paradoxically, on the one hand, information that contradicts the intended course of action produces uncertainty that may lead to hesitation and paralysis; on the other hand, information that confirms the strategist’s plans seduces him to act overconfidently and provides a false sense of certainty that will lead ultimately to demise.

Why a positive theory of strategy is impossible: the horrid dreams of generalisation

Clausewitz’ reflections on the three principal difficulties of a theory of war pose fundamental challenges to any positive theory of strategy. First, Clausewitz points out the importance of qualities that influence the course of events, yet they can hardly be quantified and made part of a rational calculation. Imagined as a coherent singular entity, an army is in reality constituted through a heterogeneous network of things and people, all of which are subject to centrifugal and centripetal forces, simultaneously pulling them apart and pushing them against each other. The resulting friction produced by the minutest detail, the smallest event, the least significant person constantly threatens to disintegrate the military machine. The iron will of the leader may overcome that friction, but, to put it in Clausewitz’ words, when the leader crushes the obstacles, she crushes the machine along with them. Second, the elements of war are not only incommensurable and constantly in friction with each other, they are also reactive: war involves living forces that react to actions and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Hence, whether a move was right or wrong can only be judged in hindsight after the reaction of the opponent has occurred. However, it is a theory of little value if its truth claims are contingent on the unpredictable reaction of others and can only be evaluated in retrospect. Third, Clausewitz understands war as an information problem. Limited by bounded rationality, common sense advises to update strategy constantly to reflect changing conditions. For Clausewitz, the problem resides exactly therein: new knowledge will not overthrow the entire strategy, but it may cause hesitation. The more information we receive, the more our uncertainty increases.

Yet it is even more harmful if the information we receive from the battlefield confirms the grand plan: in this case the confidence of the strategist will increase until one unexpected event eventually destroys the strategist's paper edifice; and with it, the strategist's army.

The three difficulties that Clausewitz elaborates in painstaking detail represent a fundamental critique of any positive theory of strategy. No matter whether strategy theories follow an outside-in approach (e.g. environmental analyses) or an inside-out approach (e.g. resource-based perspectives), the Clausewitzian critique dismantles them. They might sound 'theoretically very well', but turn out to be of little value as soon as the 'friction' of reality starts its grinding work. Action in war is 'movement in a resistant medium', a resistance that feeds off an 'infinity of petty circumstances'. A theory of strategy would have to include a systematic analysis of the minute details that potentially could trigger big events. Even events that do not happen might have an important impact on the future state of affairs.

These criticisms amount to Clausewitz' fundamental concern: the fog of war obscures the strategist's view, obstructing attempts to develop strategy as a disciplined, systematic body of knowledge about the conduct of war. Clausewitz concludes that a 'positive theory [of war] is impossible' (75). His scepticism in regards to a positive science of strategy finds its fullest and finest expression on a mere one and a half pages dedicated to the 'elements of strategy', including moral, physical, mathematical, geographical and statistical elements. After identifying these elements, Clausewitz reminds us that:

to treat upon strategy according to these elements would be the most unfortunate idea that could be conceived, for these elements are generally manifold and intimately connected with each other in every single operation of war. We should lose ourselves in the most soulless analysis, and as if in a horrid dream, we should be for ever trying in vain to build up an arch to connect this base of abstractions with facts belonging to the real world. (157)

The forever changing constellation of elements that make up war prevents generalising singular events into an abstract theory. Such attempts are condemned to be nothing more than a 'soulless analysis'. Because each movement in war follows its own context-specific logic, Clausewitz is critical toward any form of generalisation:

What is more natural than that the war of the French Revolution had its own way of doing things? And what theory could ever have included that peculiar method? The evil is only that such a manner originating in a special case easily outlives itself, because it continues whilst circumstances imperceptibly change. (87)

For Clausewitz, the 'evil' of generalisation results from the discrepancy between static representations on paper and the ever so slightly changing reality. The 'evil which we constantly stumble upon is a lame, totally inadmissible application of certain one-sided systems as of a formal code of laws' (99). It is the 'pompous retinue of technical terms' and the pseudo-systematic appearance of analyses which create those 'horrid dreams' the student of strategy suffers from:

Any critic who has not adopted a system, either because he has not found one to please him, or because he has not yet been able to make himself master of one, will at least occasionally make use of a piece of one, as one would use a ruler, to show the blunders committed by a general. The most of them are incapable of reasoning without using as a help here and there some shreds of scientific military theory. The smallest of these fragments, consisting in mere scientific words and metaphors, are often nothing more than ornamental flourishes of critical narration. Now it is in the nature of things that all technical and scientific expressions which belong to a system lose their propriety, if they ever had any, as soon as they are distorted, and used as general axioms, or as small crystalline talismans, which have more power of demonstration than simple speech. (99)

Hence any ambition to create a ‘science of war’ in the strictest sense turns out to be a dangerous illusion. For the analytical vocabulary derived from past events serves as nothing but a ruler to judge action in hindsight, but it fails to provide guidance for the future (McKinlay et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2013). Once generalised, words and metaphors become ossified in a system and lose their value, resembling ‘crystalline talismans’.

How, then, is the study of strategy possible?

Means by which strategy can be studied: society, power, history

Strategy, interest and society

Clausewitz’ famous dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means provides an important clue for the study of strategy. In his words, politics are ‘the womb in which war develops – where its outlines already exist in their hidden, rudimentary, form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos’ (83). Clausewitz argues that politics and war are situated along the same continuum. War is not the exception to or the suspension of politics, but its logical extension. Clausewitz summarised this idea in the equation that war might possess its own grammar, but not its own logic. War is always an ‘instrument of policy’ and its logic is of a political nature:

war can never be separated from political intercourse, and if, in the consideration of the matter, this is done in any way, all the threads of the different relations are, to a certain extent, broken, and we have before us a senseless thing without an object. This kind of idea would be indispensable even if war was perfect war, the perfectly unbridled element of hostility, for all the circumstances on which it rests, and which determine its leading features, viz. our own power, the enemy’s power, allies on both sides, the characteristics of the people and their Governments respectively, etc., [...] are they not of a political nature, and are they not so intimately connected with the whole political intercourse that it is impossible to separate them? (83)

War, Clausewitz believes, has to be understood as ‘part of the whole’, the whole being politics. This idea occupied Foucault, who, in an interview before his death, said that the last thing he would like to study in his life would be war and the institution of war in society (Foucault, 1996). What sparked Foucault’s interest? He turned Clausewitz’ dictum on its head: if war is the continuation of politics by other means, said Foucault, then politics can also be conceived of as extension of war by other means. In his words (1994b: 295), the question is: ‘[w]ho first thought that politics was war pursued by other means?’ While war is the extension of politics, politics, in turn, internalise the mechanisms of war inside its own body politic. Society can drift anytime into war; even peaceful periods contain the seeds of destruction. But that also means that war has to be institutionalised within society, a point Foucault made repeatedly in his lectures in the late 1970s (Foucault, 1994b; Reid, 2003; Deacon, 2003). Disciplinary forms of power give testimony to how military technologies spread throughout society. For instance, Frederick Taylor’s scientific management was a technology of power that controlled the body of the worker in a fashion similar to how the Prussian military had reorganised its infantry (Foucault, 1977). For Foucault, war provides the model for organising society: ‘the force relationship which for a long time had found expression in war, in every form of warfare, gradually became invested in the order of power’ (Foucault, quoted in Reid, 2003, 4).

While Foucault sees war as providing an analytics of politics in society, Clausewitz attempts to understand the political nature of war. Yet, for both authors, strategy plays a central role in the relation between politics and war: strategy represents the epistemological space which contains both politics and war. Both politics and war

represent different ends of a continuum marked by power relations. These power relations are the subject of strategy, as Foucault argues:

relations of power are strategic relations. Every time one side does something, the other responds by developing a conduct, a behaviour that counterinvests it, tries to escape it, diverts it, turns the attack against itself, etc. This nothing is ever stable in these power relations. (quoted in Reid, 2003, 4)

Strategy always relates to, and is constitutive of, power relations because it aims at changing the conduct of the opponent. Hence Foucault (1994a: 142) suggests decoding ‘the mechanisms brought into play in power relations in terms of strategies’. In short, strategy must always be analysed as strategy of power, i.e. as an attempt to assert control and to influence things, people and events.

Clausewitz and Foucault would have agreed on that point, perhaps. However, they differ in their analysis as to why strategy plays a central role across the continuum, enveloping both war and politics. Foucault develops the notion of governmentality to describe how strategies of power structure possible actions and influence the conduct of conduct. He (1994c) relates the debate back to Machiavelli and his interlocutors, who were concerned (and disagreed) about the art of governing and government.

Clausewitz suggests an alternative reading of strategies of power. For him it is the concept of ‘commerce’ that can be used to explicate the relation between politics and war:

We therefore conclude that war does not belong in the realm of arts and sciences; rather it is part of man’s social existence. War is a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way which it differs from other conflicts. Rather than comparing it to art we could more accurately compare it to commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale. (83)

As this quote suggests, Clausewitz believes that commerce provides the mechanism to understand the strategies of power at play in war and politics. He understands commerce as the principle through which both politics and war are organised.

The key characteristic of commerce is (at least to some degree) conflicting interest between trading parties. As Hirschman (1977) argued, the concept of interest began with the enlightenment to represent the dominant mode of political thought in the Western world, amalgamating the force of passion with the scrutiny of reason. A commercial society is a society concerned with the calculation of interests (Smith, 1994). To think strategically means not to be guided by a general law or higher principles; rather, it means to base one’s actions on the anticipated reaction that might follow. The principle of reactivity becomes the organising mode of a commercial society, the anticipated future reaction becoming the rationale for action and the criteria for decision making in the present. In a strange reversal of time the future paradoxically casts its shadow back on the present, moulding it in the face of the yet-to-come. The teleological notion of time is replaced by a circular notion of time. Feedback, and not the force of law or principle, represents the main stimulus for action.

This gives rise to some unintended consequences. To strategise means to constantly seize up the space between politics and war, anticipating conflicts by relating one’s own interests to that of others who, of course, do the same. The constant adjustment of one’s own action causes continuous adjustments by all other actors in the environment. On an aggregated level, the attempt to reduce uncertainty through strategy by individual actors increases the overall complexity and uncertainty. Like the Keynesian beauty contest where one has to guess who the majority of people will find most beautiful, one’s decisions cannot be based on one’s own tastes; rather, one has to anticipate how others will vote –

who themselves calculate an imaginary average as the basis for their decision . . . and so on ad infinitum:

It is not a case of choosing those [faces] that, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those that average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And there are some, I believe, who practice the fourth, fifth and higher degrees. (Keynes, 1936, 156)

In a commercial society dominated by the mutual calculation of interests, strategy reproduces itself, and with it, conflict, in an endless spiral. In so doing it produces, as a side effect, a general nervousness in which, as a business strategist once wrote, 'only the paranoid survive.'³

Power and strategy

Strategy's calculation leads to a paradox: if a true theory existed about a successful strategy that would become obvious to both conflicting parties, one could expect both to deviate from the true strategy to reap the benefits of surprise. The truth put forward in the theory would defeat itself, so to speak. Its truth would be a function of its dissemination. Hence strategy cannot represent a body of knowledge about how to manage and master future conflicts successfully. In one of the accompanying reflections to *On War*, Clausewitz writes:

The theory of the Grande Guerre, or Strategy, as it is called, is beset with extraordinary difficulties, and we may affirm that very few men have clear conceptions of the separate subjects, that is, conceptions carried up to their full logical conclusions. In real action most men are guided merely by the tact of judgment which hits the object more or less accurately, according as they possess more or less genius. This is the way in which all great Generals have acted, and therein partly lay their greatness and their genius, that they always hit upon what was right by this tact. Thus also it will always be in action, and so far this tact is amply sufficient. (18)

A theory of strategy, Clausewitz reiterates, would have to deal with such a high level of complexity that it would undermine its attempts to make the past intelligible and the future predictable. Rather than theory, it is the 'tact of judgment' of a more or less genius person that guides action. By definition, genius is a concept that defies explanation or categorisation, i.e. it black-boxes decisions and attributes them to individual abilities beyond reasoning. Napoleon and Friedrich II serve as Clausewitz' favourite examples for the genius' impenetrable effectiveness. For action does not need strategic reflection; as he points out, tact is amply sufficient for appropriate action. If tact suffices though, where and how does the need for strategy arise? In continuation of the same excerpt quoted above, Clausewitz provides a crucial reflection on the role of strategy:

But when it is a question, not of acting oneself, but of convincing others in a consultation, then all depends on clear conceptions and demonstration of the inherent relations, and so little progress has been made in this respect that most deliberations are merely a contention of words, resting on no firm basis, and ending either in every one retaining his own opinion, or in a compromise from mutual considerations of respect, a middle course really without any value. (18)

This passage is of great significance: strategy becomes necessary not when the need to act arises but when others need to be *convinced in consultation*. Strategy is a means of narrating how possible actions could relate to each other and form a cohesive pattern. The clearness and consistency of the strategic narrative performs its function in deliberations and political debate, not on the battlefield. In other words, strategy represents a mechanism

to gather political support for ideas during consultation with others. The *theory of the Grande Guerre* is not a blueprint for action but a discursive device to influence, legitimise and justify political action.

The genius of Clausewitz is in anticipating a shift in the socio-political constitution of society. It furnishes politics with a narrative infrastructure that allows truth claims to be made and contested. In this context strategy represents a novel form of legitimating truth claims. Indeed, a sovereign modelled after Hobbes' *Leviathan* would not need to be strategic. The sovereign's words are orders that do not need to convince but have to be obeyed. Similarly, Rousseau's society, which is bound through contractual arrangements, would have limited use for strategy, as order is derived through exegesis of the law and its enforcement. Both Hobbes and Rousseau represent traditional tropes of contractual social order, derived from either executive fiat or general will. At the heart of both there is a fictional gathering of citizens who agree on delegating their powers because the newly-formed executive's interest equals their own best interest.

The strategist represents a new figure, a new mode of exercising power that complements those of the sovereign and the *contrat social*. Its defining element, according to Clausewitz, is the fact that strategy structures the political space of deliberations and negotiations in which different actors struggle over meanings and conflicting interests. Put metaphorically, strategy represents the continuation of Machiavellism with other means; it is not the prince who imposes his will on his subordinates but the institution of war and its strategic rationality that enable the calculation and balancing of interests, just like trade and commerce enable balancing needs and wants. The necessity for strategy emerges out of several voices that compete for authoring the future course of action. In such situations, strategy offers itself as a discursive device in which authors attempt to assert their authority. In this sense strategy marks the sovereign's tacit acknowledgement that the world is polycentric and it indicates the beginning of an age in which convincing arguments need to be based on certain forms of representation (such as numbers) to become persuasive. In other words, through strategy, politics becomes aestheticised. Strategy is always a representation of perspectives, a staging of facts, speeches given on behalf of a real clientele or an imagined community, and a silencing of other voices; it is about canvassing the big picture and seducing through its aesthetics (see Kornberger, 2012; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011).

Making strategy critical

If a general, prescriptive theory of strategy is impossible to develop, how does knowledge about strategy relate to practice? A subheading in Clausewitz' second book is 'Means left by which a theory is possible (the difficulties are not everywhere equally great)'. For Clausewitz, nothing could be more detrimental pedagogically than listening to heroes and their success stories. Best practice examples, to translate it into modern strategy-speak, do more harm than good. These accounts are misleading because the final result colours the events that preceded it, yet results and actions might have been only loosely connected with each other. In the words of Clausewitz:

If it [success] has not proceeded from accidental circumstances, it is almost impossible that the knowledge of it should not have an effect on the judgement passed on events which have preceded it, for we see these things in the light of this result, and it is to a certain extent by it that we first become acquainted with them and appreciate them. (96)

Hero stories give rise to the illusion that the experienced success is causally linked to actions that are open for analysis, can be separated from the context of these actions, and if

repeated would lead to the same result. A simple thought experiment already mentioned above problematises these assumptions. Imagine two armies facing each other in battle; both their generals have read the same hero story about a past success. Even if we (against Clausewitz) assume that the story contained some valuable information, this information becomes useless if both generals have read it. This leads to the paradoxical result that the truth of strategy as a normative science is a function of its dissemination. But what kind of truth depends on its dissemination to remain true?

Disillusioned by the impossibility to define a positive theory of strategy, Clausewitz proposes a different episteme of war and strategy. For him, the ‘possibility of a theory lies in the point of view that it does not necessarily require to be a *direction* for action.’ (76). Although theory cannot claim to guide action, it plays a different and precise role in the education of the future strategist. Clausewitz posits that ‘[theory] should educate the mind of the future leader in war, or rather guide him in his self-instruction, but not accompany him to the field of battle’ (76). In other words, strategy theory is an instrument for reflection that prepares the mind of the leader for the complexities and subtleties of reality. In order to accomplish such an educational purpose, strategy has to be critical:

The influence of theoretical principles upon real life is produced more through criticism than through doctrine, for criticism is an application of abstract truth to real events; therefore it not only brings truth of this description nearer to life, but also accustoms reason more to such truths by the constant repetition of their application. (88)

Strategic knowledge represents a threefold criticism: it is critical in as far as it is historical knowledge; an investigation of the effects (as opposed to the success) of actions; and an examination of the means used in a given situation. Hence critical strategy is not a negative undertaking; rather, like the critical mass necessary to cause a chemical reaction, criticality in strategy is concerned with the conditions of the possibility for certain effects to come into existence. Consequently the critical study of strategy is the antidote of the much-celebrated case study that provides the dominant genre of strategy knowledge. The case study promises to reveal the causes of success within its own narrative and to capture cause and effects in a doctrine that transcends its origins. The episteme of a Clausewitz-inspired strategy does not follow the path from the singular to the abstract and generalisable. Rather it takes it cues from a critical and detailed study of historical events. In this sense, the study of strategy is not concerned with the future (as strategy seems to suggest) but with the past. It does not produce monumental or antiquarian histories of great personalities fighting grand battles; rather, strategy scholarship resembles critical history that recognises, to paraphrase [Nietzsche \(1967\)](#), the blood and horror at the bottom of all good things.

Concluding remarks

Applications

Following Clausewitz into the field, what would a narrative of strategy focus upon? Not many events in recent history have been of a more strategic nature than the Cuban Missile Crisis. On Friday 26 October 1962, four days after Kennedy had announced publicly that the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuba was unacceptable, Khrushchev sent a letter to the US administration that marked the beginning of the end of the crisis. The letter read:

[I]f indeed war should break out, then it would not be in our power to contain or stop it, for such is the logic of war. I have participated in two wars and know that war ends when it has

rolled through cities and villages, everywhere sowing death and destruction [. . .]. We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot. And what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose [. . .]. (Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy from 26 October 1962, quoted in [Munton and Welch, 2007, 72–73](#))

The next morning a new and altogether different letter from Khrushchev arrived at the White House. In matter-of-fact language the letter demanded, amongst other things, that the US withdraw its Jupiter missiles from Turkey, a deal the US could not accept (at least publicly) as it would have divided its NATO partners. The Kennedy administration faced a Kafkaesque situation. There were two contradicting letters on the table, one poetic, written by someone who seemed truly concerned and emotional, and another one, written by a hardliner who did not seem to shy away from nuclear conflict. Former ambassador to Moscow, Tommy Thompson, and others urged the president to respond to the first letter and to ignore the second one. Thompson knew Khrushchev personally and could empathise with the situation Khrushchev found himself in. Thompson argued that out of a rushed idea to support his Cuban friend Castro, Khrushchev had created a situation that was spinning out of control. Now he was looking for a way out without losing face. Kennedy decided to respond to the first, poetic letter and ignored the second message. The reply marked the turning point of the crisis.

How would a Clausewitz-inspired student of strategy make sense of this episode that, according to then secretary of defence, Robert [McNamara \(1995\)](#), brought civilization to the brink of annihilation? Rather than trying to distil a general model for future action from the event, the strategist would: understand politics and war as two ends on a continuum constructed around conflict of interests; investigate the discursive repertoire that strategy provides to calculate conflicting interests, to make the conflict intelligible, and turn it into an object for intervention; pay attention to the seemingly mundane and idiosyncratic, the human, all too human, that turns out to be a decisive factor in the development of the crisis; note how commerce, exchange and tit-for-tat guide conduct; analyse how possible futures are evoked and mobilised to justify actions in the present; and finally, the strategist would scrutinise how rational strategies of individual players lead to an overall ('MAD') irrationality in which future peace is contingent on an all-out war in the present.

Implications

Rereading Clausewitz has some not insignificant implications for strategy, organization theory and perhaps other disciplines. Strategy is not something someone 'has' or a practice that someone is engaged in. With Clausewitz, strategy becomes an adjective that attaches itself to heterogeneous things and people: a sudden downpour of rain, a rumour that flattens the troop's morale or a letter can become strategic objects that have a decisive impact on the course of events. Clausewitz' unwillingness to provide the reader with a how-to-win-a-campaign doctrine derives from his practical and theoretical experience of how minor events can have big, unforeseen impacts, and vice versa. The role of theorising war is not to provide a neat narrative about or normative models explicating the future; as Clausewitz suggested, this would be a futile exercise as the dissemination of the theory would relate inversely to its truth. Strategy knowledge must not be a *Gängelband*.⁴ The Cuban Missile Crisis can undeniably educate the mind of the future strategist, lead to self-instruction and – to borrow Aron's phrase – teach an understanding of the task at hand

without entertaining any absurd claim to communicate the secret of victory. But strategy theory would make a bad companion on the next field of battle, for, as Clausewitz suggests, strategy shares the complexities of war: ‘Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult’. (61)

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion about philosophers that go to b-school see [Carter \(2008\)](#).
2. Quotes from Clausewitz’s *On War* are taken from Colonel Graham’s 1873 English translation. Upon comparison with the German original, some quotes have been modified.
3. This is the title of a book by Andrew Grove, former chairman and CEO of Intel.
4. He uses the old German word *Gängelband* to describe what strategy ought not to be. A *Gängelband* is an eighteenth-century expression for a leading string, which was put around small children’s bodies to help them learn to walk.

Notes on contributor

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