Research Article

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Politics of Sight: Civilizational Mission of Modern Warfare

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Abstract: Civilization is not what it means and it is not eliminating brutality, and yet it would frame uncivilized elements within the civilized framework with legitimacy. However, the thrust of civilization has not been towards the elimination of such acts altogether, but towards hiding such acts out of sight, making the individual oblivious to their true nature due to a lack in ability to visualize and therefore, to fully cognize. The paper critically examines in what ways the concept of concealment and distance hijacked by modern warfare and technology to remove the sense of violence from the cognition by creating an illusionary image of civilization. The phenomenon of modern war is a similar representation of modernity's betrayed promises. The purpose of this research paper is to employ the conceptual framework of Politics of sight offered by Pachirat in his work "*Every Twelve Seconds*", to show how the war in the modern world does not disappear but is made acceptable through concealment and distancing. The case study method along with the discourse analysis has been employed to derive the politics of sights and modern warfare, and it is based on a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary. In conclusion, the paper argues that the modern battlefield differs significantly from its pre-modern counterpart, in that it is governed by many rules articulated in terms of humanitarian law and operationalised by technologies, which, to many, might serve as an apparent indicator of civility. However, a discursive reading into modern warfare, structures and apparatuses built around it, and technologies that enable it might indicate otherwise.

Keywords: Modern Warfare; Civilization; Liberal Peace; Politics of Sight; Pachirat; Europe

1 Introduction

The notion of civility has turned such things as brutality in terms of violence to distasteful acts that serve as a marker of distinction between the 'civilised' and 'uncivilized'. However, the thrust of civilization has not been towards the elimination of such acts altogether, but towards hiding such acts out of sight, making the individual oblivious to their true nature due to a lack of ability to visualise and therefore, to fully cognise. The phenomenon of war is a similar representation of modernity's betrayed promises.

The modern battlefield differs significantly from its pre-modern counterpart, in that it is governed by many rules articulated in terms of humanitarian law and operationalised by technologies, which to many might serve as an apparent indicator of civility. However, a discursive reading into modern warfare, structures and apparatuses built around it, and technologies that enable it might indicate otherwise. The purpose of this research paper is to employ the conceptual framework of Politics of sight offered by Pachirat in his work "*Every Twelve Seconds*", to show how war in the modern world does not disappear but is made acceptable through concealment and distancing.

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2 Literature Review

2.1 The Liberal Peace Illusion

The liberal belief in harmony as the natural condition of men, arising out of the recognition that individual prosperity is rooted in collective prosperity, led thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Adam Smith to postulate the declining tendency of liberal capitalist democracies to enter into a war with one another. Kant's assertion that war is "the scourge of humankind", "the greatest evil oppressing man", "the source of all evils and moral corruption" and "the destroyer of everything good"¹ and thus rational forces that push mankind towards peace and harmony, appealed to by an enlightened political rule, shall help reduce military aggression. Paradoxically, the modern era began with wars, and wars became the vanguard of modernity². And, even though it was held that short term violence could occur as a consequence of the transition from feudality to modernity³ there were few attempts to uncover the violence that was built into the political structures that were brought into existence during the Enlightenment. This is, for example, corroborated by Sociology's neglect of war as an object of explicit theorization that came from the material realities of Europe in which the discipline took birth. Europe's century-long relative interstate peace seemed to confirm the liberal thesis that industrial regimes replace military regimes in the modern world, and even though wars did take place, both in Europe (Crimean War, Balkan Wars) and outside of Europe (in the form of colonial wars), they were written off as insignificant because they lacked ideological character.

But wars did help shape the European states system, even though it was understudied as a "total sociological phenomenon", and formed a part of late enlightenment thinking with philosophers such as Marx pointing to class warfare as a "structural determinant of modernity", highlighting intrastate instead of interstate war. As Buchan points out, "A re-examination of their (Enlightenment thinkers) thought suggests the need for a more nuanced view of civilisation, one that appreciates that the promise of domestic peace that comes with civilisation is also laden with the peril of war and new dynamics of international order; civilization was not simply about civility and civil society, commerce and freedom, it was also about states, military power and the perils of empire in the emergence of this 'new' Europe and its inexorable rise to global supremacy"⁴. A civilised state as having a greater capacity to wage war was, thus, an essential feature of civilization⁵. However, this Janus-faced aspect of civilisation, with violence stemming from modernization efforts on the one hand and the modern age as being characterised by reason with lessened tendencies to resort to violence on the other, was sustained by distance and the concealment of actions and practices considered 'brutal' and, 'barbaric' in the pre-modern era. "The scene of this violence was thousands of miles away from the metropolitan countries, and it did not penetrate the self-understanding of the West as peaceful and progressive"⁶.

3 Methodology

The case study method and discourse analysis have been employed to the data collection, and it is based on a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary. The primary sources include the official documents and so on, particularly related to modern warfare. In addition to the primary resources, the study has also used a variety of secondary resources that include (but are not confined to) journal articles, books, reports, and other online resources to analyse the creation and precise nature of the discourse on the theme(s) in question.

The case study method gives more flexibility to conduct the research and particularly leads to a qualitative analysis of data while counting the position of smaller states. According to Odell, "qualitative studies are equal or superior

¹ Brian Orend, "Kant's Just War Theory," (Journal of the History and Philosophy, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1999), pp. 323-353.

² Edward Tiryakian, "War: the Covered Side of Modernity," (International Sociology, Vol. 14, No. 4, 1999), pp. 473-489.

³ Edward Tiryakian, "War: the Covered Side of Modernity," (International Sociology, Vol. 14, No. 4, 1999), pp. 473-489.

⁴ Bruce Buchan, "Civilization, Sovereignty and War: The Scottish Enlightenment and International Relations," (International Relations, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2006), pp 175-192.

⁵ Bruce Buchan, "Civilization, Sovereignty and War: The Scottish Enlightenment and International Relations," (International Relations, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2006), pp 175-192.

⁶ Philip Lawrence, *Modernity and War: The Creed of Absolute Violence*, (Landon; Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1997).

for generating valid theories [and] case study methods allow stronger empirical grounding for a hypothesis for the cases studied. They allow greater confidence in the validity of the premise, for the cases studied than other statistical methods⁷”.

4 Discussion

4.1 The Civilizing Process: Concealment and Distancing

It was not only through discursive legitimation that civilized states have justified wars in the modern era, but also through cognitive distancing and concealment. Pachirat’s study of contemporary slaughterhouses in America invokes the concept of distancing and concealment to show how the slaughter business thrives on the concerted effort by those who profit from it, to physically and cognitively distance the general population from the routinized brutality that helps produce the meat they consume⁸. In doing so, he helps us make broader observations about modern civilisation and its relationship with violence. Violence in civilised society does not disappear to mark a clear distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ but becomes deliberately hidden and distanced from the members of the society at large. This act of hiding and distancing serve as “mechanisms of power in the modern society”, and to what Pachirat points out as the “politics of sight.” He defines the politics of sight as “organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden and to breach, literally or figuratively, zones of confinement to bring about social and political transformation⁹”.

Norbert Elias’s conceptualisation of the “Civilizing Process” offers insight into how ‘civility’ came to be associated with a deliberate attempt to hide things that became distasteful, “behind the scenes of social life¹⁰”. At the same time, the structures and entities that seek to gain from what has become “distasteful” are not completely dismantled or done away with. This constitutes the relationship between power and sight in the modern era. An intricate understanding of this relationship lays in the exploration seemingly unproblematic and universal notions of development and progress as products of a particular political culture, that further rely on the “distancing and concealment of morally and physically repugnant practices rather than their elimination or transformation¹¹”. This process of concealment is brought about by physical, social and linguistic confinement, making it inaccessible to society at large¹². Extending Pachirat’s analysis to wars, Sirota points out how politics of sight shape American military policies- from ending conscription and thereby separating the civilians from the consequences of military action to engage in combat through unmanned aerial vehicles, thereby removing the pilot-shooters from the population under attack and finally the suppression of actual representations of war by the media and military establishment¹³.

A comprehensive study of the phenomena of war, which was traditionally seen as an activity of the state in the modern era due to its monopoly over violence and thus concealed even from those who seek to study it, remained confined to the realm of strategy and formulation of military doctrines and little attention was paid to the social character of war and how actors within the international system (collectives and individuals) engage in war as a social activity. This gave rise to a “methodological confinement” that separated researchers from the social world they sought to study.

However, the concealment and distancing of war and associated violence was not aimed at creating a state of total oblivion, but a partial one, as the paper will elaborate in the section that follows.

7 John Odell, “Case Study Methods in International Politics Economy,” (International Studies Perspectives, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2001), pp. 161-176.

8 Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds, Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, (Landon; Yale University Press, 2011).

9 Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds, Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, (Landon; Yale University Press, 2011).

10 Norbert Elias, *the Civilization Process*, (New York; Urizen Books, 1978).

11 Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds, Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, (Landon; Yale University Press, 2011).

12 Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds, Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, (Landon; Yale University Press, 2011).

13 David Sirota, “*The Politics of Sight*,” (Truthdig, 2012).

4.2 Individual and the State of Partial Oblivion

What side of war does an individual get to see, if at all? This question leads us to explore the distinction between the individual and institutions such as the state. The individual is disposed to a whole variety of emotional experiences and arousals, however, institutions are not. Because institutions come into existence to fulfil a specific and well-defined purpose, they tend to have limited emotive attributes, in that they are able to appeal to or arouse only specific emotions. For example, the institution of the state owing to its very constitution rooted in the definition of Otherness and knowledge creation of fear that compliments a specific definition of Other, is predisposed to arouse emotions such as fear and a host of other emotions associated with fear, such as hatred, anger, and mistrust among its population¹⁴. Going back to Pachirat's thesis, those who profit from the distasteful tend to hide its aspects that arouse feelings which might cause obstructions in the profit-making imperatives of an enterprise, thus hiding objects which arouse such feelings, leaving the individual in a partial state of oblivion. This point is crucial as it differs slightly from Pachirat's conception of the politics of sight, in that an individual needs not only to be distanced from certain aspects of a distasteful object but accept the structural transformations around it that aim to conceal the object in question. Talking about war, actors such as the state not only need to hide aspects of it that make it morally repulsive, but also need to place elements around it to make it acceptable. Placement of structural inhibitors and exhibitors of certain specific emotions help formulate individual conceptions of the legitimacy of violence. Thus, actors such as the state or the military establishment that is one of its constituents tend to intervene in individual cognitive processes.

Thus, the process of concealment and distancing takes note of the constitutive elements of cognition: knowing and feeling. As Pulcini notes, "the information that enters our cognitive system can only have an effective impact on our action if it succeeds in creating images laden with emotion in our psyche¹⁵". Distancing and concealment, then, seek to influence our knowledge as well as how we tend to feel about that knowledge. Therefore, it is essential that the politics of sight thesis must incorporate an affective aspect, simply because assigning an essentially cultural value to such notions as distastefulness and brutality, are means to ascertain how individuals ought to feel toward these notions. In the case of modernity, the notions of civility that assigned negative values to certain objects meant not the disappearing of those objects but distanced to hamper the individual capability to fully cognise these objects, and hence, determined the individuals' relationship with it. In the section that follows, the paper will attempt to show how distance and concealment are sought to have a legitimising effect on phenomena such as war.

4.3 Airpower: Dehumanisation of Victim and Humanisation of Violence

Lawrence, while referring to the advancements in technology and increase in modern capacity to inflict violence, states "man's technical powers had outgrown his moral capacities¹⁶". Such advancements in technology have not only enhanced capabilities to inflict violence but also the capabilities to hide and distance this violence from those inflicting it, directly or indirectly. New technologies- including the use of drones, precision-guided weapons, cyber weapons, and autonomous robots- have led to optimism about the possibility of reducing the intensity and cognitional sense of violence by using concealment and distancing of the physical manifestation of violence. For instance, Micheal Walzer examined targeted killings and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), more colloquially known as drones¹⁷. Drones provide the opportunity for more discriminate use of military force against targets, but can also provide a temptation to use military force more often or in more places than would otherwise be the case. This would portray the advancements in technology in terms of its capabilities to hide and distance the violence from those inflicting it, directly or indirectly. Pulcini articulates this as a tendency to be passive and dispossessed- "man has lost his capacity to control it and foresee its effects, made all the more inauspicious by global dissemination of the risks... the 'Promethean gap' denounced by Günther Anders – namely the Promethean split between doing and foreseeing, producing and imagining – ends up

¹⁴ see generally: David Campbell, *Writing Security: the United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, (Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Corey Robin, "Fear, Genealogy Morals," (Social Research, Vol. 67, No.4. 2000), pp. 1085-1115.

¹⁵ Elena Pulcini, *Case of the World: Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age*, (Dordrecht, Springer Publication, 2013).

¹⁶ Philip Lawrence, *Modernity and War: The Creed of Absolute Violence*, (Landon; Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1997).

¹⁷ Scott Sagan, "Ethics, Technology and War," (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 145, No. 4. 2016), pp. 6-11.

generating a situation of passiveness and dispossession which causes an inversion, or rather, a ‘perversion’ of human power into impotence¹⁸”. The phenomena that the paper is going to analyze through the theoretical lens of politics of sight are the physical and cognitive distancing of populations belonging to a state waging war, from the battlefield. This physical distancing that also makes way for cognitive distancing is enabled by advancements in military technologies. One way this technology is harnessed by the military establishment to distance even the perpetrators of violence from visually perceiving their actions is by increasing reliance on air power during battles.

Over the past few decades, the world came to witness an investment surge in improving various aspects of air operations, such as “intensive training and in new capabilities for battlefield surveillance, battle management, stealth, precision weapons”, the result of which is exemplified by the Operation Desert Storm in Iraq (1991), where the US Air Force dominated the modern battlefield for the most part¹⁹. During the 1990s, the Korean War served as a playfield for covert air-to-air combat between Soviet and American Pilots, and the information about the same was made public knowledge a decade later when the American government declassified relevant intelligence documents. The salience of airpower is also reinforced as the number of drone and fighter-bomber strikes increase and form a greater proportion of contemporary Western military operations against terrorists and insurgents with limited capacity to retaliate²⁰. Airpower has figured in an increasingly important role in military configurations since World War I, with expansion in its use from observation and tactical reconnaissance to strategic bombing²¹. Airpower was also seen as an important element of the nuclear revolution that had begun in the aftermath of World War II, as it served as the delivery means. Apart from the nuclear dimension, further transformations to air warfare were made by emerging technologies such as guided missile systems, electronic warfare, jet propulsion, etc. and it is this capital-intensive nature of airpower that gave rise to economies of scale in terms of large areas coming under the influence of a smaller number of aircraft. Consequently, the manpower requirement for conducting aerial warfare was lowered. For example, air raids during the Vietnam War required only dozens of American aircraft rather than the hundreds required in earlier wars, and smaller crews replaced larger crews in the strike role²². Technologies such as precision-guided munitions (PGMs) made it possible to attack fixed military installations in urban areas and deployed military forces- moving, stationary, or entrenched- even in cases of lower visibility²³. Further transformations are underway with the advent of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) which are taking up roles in airpower, previously undertaken and assigned to manned aircraft systems, and may eventually be deployed for a variety of air missions, such as “Air-to-Air Refueling (AAR), Strike Control and Reconnaissance, Close Air Support, Defensive Counter Air (DCA) and Offensive Counter Air (OCA) missions”²⁴. They have many advantages over manned aircraft systems such as the enhanced capability to carry out operations in toxic environments and to persist on tasks for longer periods, reduction in procurement and life cycle costs, and the mitigation of the effects of warfare on aircrew.

The history of the evolution of airpower in modern warfare is also a history of technology-assisted distancing of the perpetrators of violence during war from the consequences of the violence they inflict. From a decline in the number of crews required to conduct an aerial operation to burgeoning unmanned aircraft system technologies, the thrust has been towards physical removal of the soldier from the site of the battlefield. Wars, then, are analogous to Pachirat’s slaughterhouses and crewmen on aircraft and drone operators become workers in the slaughterhouses. There are two forces at play which determine the airmen’s interpretive frames with which they view the act of inflicting violence over fellow human beings. These are the dehumanisation of victims of violence, and belief in constructed frames of humanitarian violence. Apart from war rhetoric, such as those of the West which tend to demonise the victims of their bombs using labels that include ‘terrorists’, ‘criminals’ or ‘collateral damage’, dehumanisation is also a function of the virtualisation of warfare due to airmen’s inability to adequately visualize the warfare and an inability to see the attacked

18 Elena Pulcini, *Case of the World: Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age*, (Dordrecht, Springer Publication, 2013).

19 Rand Organization, “Introduction: Airpower and the New American Way of War,” (Rand Organization, 2015).

20 Mathias Delori, “Humanitarian Violence: How Western Airman Kills and Let Die in Order to Make Live,” (Critical Military Studies, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2019), pp 322- 340.

21 Karl Mueller, *Airpower*, (California; John Wiley and Sons, 2010).

22 Mathias Delori, “Humanitarian Violence: How Western Airman Kills and Let Die in Order to Make Live,” (Critical Military Studies, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2019), pp 322- 340.

23 Mathias Delori, “Humanitarian Violence: How Western Airman Kills and Let Die in Order to Make Live,” (Critical Military Studies, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2019), pp 322- 340.

24 Colin Wills, *Unmanned Combat Air Systems in Future Warfare*, (New York; Palgrave Macmillan Publishers).

population's human face. The virtualisation of war is a function of the creation of new destructive technologies that came to transform the Western way of war through computers and guidance systems that result in the cognising of war within strict economic frames, and the formulation of a 'playstation' mentality of airmen and drone operators, reducing the victim of an airstrike to an anonymous flicker across a screen. In conjunction with this force, there is also a broader force ushered by constructed frames of humanitarian violence. Violence, if framed as a lesser evil, becomes morally acceptable, and airmen's inter-subjective reasoning strengthens their belief in the humanitarian nature of the violence they inflict. Violence in war, thus, can be seen as 'naturalized' through discourses, routinised practices and apparatuses, instead of being 'natural'. The removal of perpetrators of violence also allows for the suppression of alternate war narratives at home, to which soldiers returning from the battlefield, having directly experienced and visualised the ills of war, can contribute.

Thus, the psychological impact that the greater use of aerial technologies in military operations has on airmen is brought about both by their physical and cognitive distancing from the battlefield as well as alternative formulations of violence they perpetrate to make it more morally acceptable.

5 Conclusion

The politics of sight framework opens the door to asking more important theoretical questions, like whether war becomes more likely if the actors that are actively willing to wage it can cause obstructions in the cognitive processes of those actors whose assent is sought and who do not have adequate means to directly experience the war and its consequences. This framework puts to question both neorealist and liberal conceptualisations of war in the international system. The propensity to wage war becomes not simply a function of self-reliant states seeking to maximise interests in terms of power in an anarchic system of states, but of a more fundamental feature of social life-concealment and distance. The likelihood of war and violence in international life apart from systemic factors are also determined by how well the actors causing them are divorced from perceiving their lived realities and experiences.

The employment of this framework also enables researchers to analyse ways of overcoming the hidden side of civilisation. The technologies that enable the concealment of war are also the ones that help uncover it, and research methods such as direct participant observation can help create alternate narratives of war and how it is experienced, thus allowing the researcher to break zones of physical, cognitive and methodological confinement.