Foucault and the Continuation of War

Jason Edwards

Abstract
In this chapter, I’ll focus on Michel Foucault’s analysis of the relationship between war, power relations and politics in his series of lectures published as Society Must Be Defended. I’ll argue that Foucault gives us good reasons to contest the liberal conception of politics as the suppression of war and the Clausewitzian view of war as a small-arm of politics. But I’ll argue against the view that Foucault is providing us with a general account or philosophy of politics as the continuation of war. Some contemporary authors, following Carl Schmitt, tend to see the political as a realm of antagonism that adopts the form of war. I’ll claim that such a view is of limited use and does not help us, as reading Foucault can, in understanding how politics and relations of power in modernity are constituted as relations of antagonism, or, in other words, how the construction of the friend-enemy distinction is characteristic of the political discourses and practices of modernity.

Key Words: Foucault, war, politics, the political, antagonism, friend-enemy distinction.

*****

1. Introduction
For a long time, the analysis of war was connected to the study of politics only in a certain Clausewitzian sense. War was what states engaged in to protect and advance their interests when diplomacy failed. In this respect, war was conceived of as an arm of politics, and one that tended to be employed only in exceptional circumstances. War, in this sense, is subordinate to politics. But what would it mean to turn this formulation on its head? What if we studied war not as the continuation of politics, but politics as the continuation of war?

In this chapter, I want to pursue this question by reference to Michel Foucault’s series of lectures that are published under the title Society Must Be Defended.1 I won’t really be offering an interpretation of Foucault’s arguments, but rather just addressing some of the problems that arise from considering politics as the continuation of war in the way that Foucault indicates. More specifically, I want to point to some of the difficulties with understanding politics as war that emerge from the assumption that there is no primal state of war and that war itself is always the product of a complex interplay of social discourses and practices. What conceptual and theoretical problems arise when we ask how social antagonism is constituted through
relations of power, and to what extent it involves forms of force and domination? Is politics, in any meaningful sense, the continuation of war, or is this simply a way of talking in light of the kind of people we think and say we are in the world today?

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first provides an overview of Foucault’s arguments in *Society Must Be Defended*. The next section deals with the immediate problems that emerge from his use of war as a means of analysing politics and power relations. The third section focuses on some of the problems of using the concept of politics as the continuation of war today, in particular as that relates to the understanding of the political as a realm of ineradicable antagonism, and the friend-enemy distinction.

2. **War Pursued by Other Means**

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault sets out to consider the question of the extent to which we can use war as an analyser of power relations, or, in his more general formulation, whether we can reverse Clausewitz’s famous maxim declaring that ‘politics is the continuation of war by other means.’ The impetus for this inquiry is Foucault’s rejection of the ‘juridical model of sovereignty.’ By this, he means a model of the state and politics which emerges in the sixteenth century, and which involves three basic terms—subject, law and sovereign. This model orients itself around the question of the legitimacy of sovereign power. In this model, sovereignty is the legitimate and sole source of all power in a society. Power, in this regard, is public power, and its nature is essentially negative. The sovereign has power over life and death, but, as Foucault claims, the juridical model effectively concedes that the real power that the sovereign possesses is over death. The sovereign can let live, that is, allow people to go on living, but letting live is always a passive act of omission. Sovereignty only really manifests itself when it kills—at least figuratively speaking. So, you might never be aware of this repressive power of the sovereign until it comes knocking on (or knocking down) your front door in the middle of the night. These acts of the sovereign are mandated in law. When this model of sovereignty arose in the sixteenth century, the operation of the law was seen as the consequence of the tacit or express agreement of subjects to be subjugated, that is to surrender themselves to the law that is an emanation of the sovereign’s will. Power, and politics, then, come from the centre—that centre is sovereignty, and the form of power relations is encoded in the laws that carry the will of the sovereign. And from the sixteenth century, the right of sovereign power is seen not as a direct gift of divinity, nor in the status of the sovereign as *paterfamilias* in the line of Adam, but rather from this subjugation of and by the subjects to the will of the sovereign.

Now, we may know this doctrine under other descriptions—the social contract theory, the liberal conception of sovereignty, etc. But
whatever its particular designation, the important point is that politics is regarded as the normal practice of a society in which sovereignty is founded on subjugation of subjects, and in which the legitimate sovereign power is exercised, on a legal basis, to kill (literally or figuratively) those who would challenge sovereignty, the law and the peace of the sovereign’s subjects. Indeed, this juridical account of sovereignty lies at the heart of all modern constitutional and public law.

Politics, then, is conceived of as the very absence of war, and this lack of war is to be contrasted with the relations that operate between human beings who live in spatial proximity when there is no sovereignty—and hence no politics. In this situation, as philosophers like Grotius, Puffendorf and Hobbes have told us, war may not be ever-present, but the very possibility of war is indeed ever-present. Where there is no subjugation of subjects to a sovereign, there will be contending forces, contending groups, who persistently seek to dominate others. Relations of domination are therefore aleatory and subject to constant change in both scope and intensity. War breaks out because men are by nature more-or-less equal. No single set of relations of domination can endure purely on the basis of the exercise of violence by some or other individual or group of individuals. Such violence has no legitimacy in the eyes of the dominated, and thus they constantly seek to overturn these relations of domination and institute new ones of which they are the authors. Domination, of course (as Weber, most famously, tells us) exists under the exercise of sovereign power, but the relations of domination under the sovereign are legitimate. The violence that is exercised by the sovereign is recognised as being rightful in the eyes of the dominated. There is a relation of inequality between sovereign and subjects, but the effect of this is that with sovereignty, not just war but the very possibility of war, is eradicated. The violence exercised by the sovereign against individuals or groups of men is not just not legitimate war, it is not war at all, since war necessarily involves parties who are essentially equal (not, of course, equal in strength of arms, but equal in the sense of having a legitimate right to engage in war, to challenge and uphold relations of domination that are indeed sustained by virtue of arms alone).

There are several respects in which Foucault wishes to challenge the juridical doctrine of the state and sovereignty, and the picture it paints of the relationship between war and politics. First, his studies of madness, medicine, punishment and incarceration in modernity had persuaded him that the notion that the conduct of individuals is only shaped by power at the level of the operation of the law that emanates from the sovereign, from the juridical process, is wrong. The ‘mechanisms’ that shape the behaviour of individuals in an asylum, in a hospital, in a penitentiary, in a classroom or on a parade-ground, are far removed from discourses of sovereignty and the law, which for all intents and purposes originate and remain oriented around the question
of the legitimate extent of royal authority. Power operates in modern societies, then, at a ‘capillary’ level; relations of force and domination are to be discovered in a whole range of social institutions and practices that are structured only partially by the laws that come down from the heights of sovereignty.

Second, it follows that what we might call ‘subjectification’ is a product of the operation of these local and diverse relations of force and domination that operate at the very periphery, and indeed sometimes beyond the peripheral vision, of sovereignty. Subjects are made by these micro-relations of power. We must pose to the juridical doctrine of sovereignty the question of where the subjects who are subjugated by sovereign power come from in the first place. Rather than taking this individual who is capable of alienating his rights, or recognising the legitimacy of sovereign right, we must acknowledge that ‘the individual is one of power’s first effects.’ Just as much as we must inquire into what social relations of force and domination turn a person into a clinically confined madman, a patient, a soldier, a student or a prisoner, we must also inquire into what relations of power transform a person into a subject of sovereign power, and a person who has the capacity to authorise political power.

Thirdly, then, Foucault wants to resist the Hobbesian model of sovereignty as the sole source of power, emanating from a sovereign centre, and in which the legitimacy of the sovereign has been established by the alienation of all social or public power from individuals who are already invested with the necessary powers of freedom to voluntarily subject themselves to subjugation.

For Foucault, then, we cannot understand power relations and politics in modern societies on the model of the juridical discourse of sovereignty. That discourse sets out to justify royal authority, the power of the sovereign, by effectively disguising the fact that such power has been established through relations of force and domination, and that it must be sustained over time through relations of force and domination. Power is compacted, so that it is seen as the medium through which the sovereign exercises his right over the life and death of his subjects. Yet this disguises the fact that relations of power operate in the hinterland of sovereignty, working within and across non-juristic forms of discourse and practice to create subjects at a micromechanical level. Accordingly, the juridical model of sovereignty cannot aid us in analysing power relations and politics in modern societies and we must turn to an alternative model. It is here that Foucault raises the question of to what extent we should embrace a model of politics as the continuation, rather than the repression, of war.

We can explode the fiction of sovereignty being the result and expression of a free surrender of men’s natural powers to the sovereign by recognising power relations for what they are—relations of domination and
force. Foucault is not, of course, the first to conceive of politics and power relations in such a way. But he presents two different ways in which this understanding of power may be articulated. First, power or force relations are essentially repressive in character; power represses ‘nature, instincts, a class or individual.’ This is a view of power that we can find at work in Hegel, Freud and Reich (indeed, Foucault dubs it, ‘Reich’s hypothesis’). Second, power relations can be conceived of as in essence a warlike struggle between contending forces, a notion Foucault identifies with Nietzsche (so, ‘Nietzsche’s hypothesis’). But these two notions should not be held to be in conflict; rather, they can be seen as being complementary. Repression is something that is always established by the application of force in war, with the victors consequently repressing the conquered. If we take this war-repression scheme as the vehicle for the analysis of power relations, then we should cease to see the question of legitimacy as being at the centre of the study of politics, and rather focus on the question of victory. But much of Foucault’s work prior to Society Must Be Defended involves a good deal of scepticism about the view of power as being essentially repressive (and this comes out most obviously in the first volume of The History of Sexuality, published shortly after he gave the lectures making up Society Must Be Defended). The concept of repression, as it appears for example in Reich’s account of the repression of infantile sexuality, often relies on attributing to people or groups qualities that are natural, at least in the sense that they are not constituted by or can operate independently of relations of power. Liberation, on this view, is seen as the overcoming of power to permit the free expression of these natural qualities—hence, for Reich, the importance of sexual freedom as a vehicle of revolution against bourgeois society. But for Foucault, while we can certainly see to an extent in relations of power the mark of a will to domination, we need to see how that which is being ‘repressed’ is itself constructed through the operation of power relations. Reich’s ‘infantile sexuality,’ in other words, is not something that is natural or primordial, but rather is constituted through a complex set of scientific, technical and ethical discourses surrounding sexuality that are articulated in nineteenth century psychiatry and later in psychoanalysis. Generally speaking, all subjects that are subject to repression must first be constituted as subjects of repression by relations of power, and more specifically, the way in which these relations are manifested in particular discourses, social institutions and practices.

If, then, we can connect together Reich’s and Nietzsche’s hypotheses, it must be in the sense that we can never allow either for a static, permanent regime of repression, nor for the overcoming of repression. What is repressed has to be constructed by relations of power, and as we have seen, Foucault regards such relations as multiple, often contradictory and aleatory. At the same time, the condition of achieving liberation from repression, in the
Reichian sense, is to secure a way of life centred on ethics and practices that have been freed from the operation of power. But it is clear that Foucault believes such a notion to be fantastic. Ethics and practices, and the way in which these interact, require the existence of subjects who are constituted, and must always be constituted, through social relations of power. With respect to the analysis of politics by the repression-war scheme, then, if we see politics as the waging of a war that lies behind the operation of apparently peaceful processes, that war can never have a conclusion; there can never be peace. There will, at different times, always be victors and vanquished, but power operates in such a way that the vanquished can become the victors. The struggle for dominance and against submission constantly goes on in the very fabric of power relations, and the discourses and practices that it works through. It is this perpetual struggle and contest in modern societies that Foucault claims can be analysed in terms of relations of force, of strategy, and of tactics. We can indeed understand politics as the continuation of war.

The bulk of *Society Must Be Defended* is concerned with the question of where the notion of understanding politics in terms of war comes from. Foucault’s aim, then, is not just to advocate the model of war as a means of analysing politics, but of tracing how that idea is constructed in the discourses of politics in the West from the sixteenth century. And indeed, there is yet a further goal of the lectures, which is to consider how this discourse of politics as war comes to be transformed into a discourse of state racism, a discourse that focuses not on a struggle of ‘races,’ understood in the broad sense of groups of men with a united national or cultural inheritance, but on a struggle between society as a whole and the biological threats posed to it—of degeneracy, counter-races and sub-races.

The discourse of war as ‘race’ conflict emerges in popular and aristocratic struggles against absolutist monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It focuses on how the society created by absolute monarchs and their juridical apparatuses are not, as the defenders of absolutism would have us believe, the outcome of the free surrendering of men’s powers to the sovereign in return for the protection of social peace for all, but rather the product of, and continuing guarantor of, the king’s victory over his enemies. This victory is not hypothetical, in the way that the social contract is, but is a real historical event. In England during the 1640s, writers like the Levellers would portray this historical event as the Norman Conquest and the subsequent ‘Norman yoke’ that had trampled over the original rights and liberties of Anglo-Saxon men. The institutions of the Norman monarchs and their successors, therefore, in fact represented the continued waging of war by the apparatuses of the monarchy and its aristocratic allies against ‘free-born Englishmen.’ In France, aristocratic writers in the early eighteenth century, such as Boulainvilliers, saw the French monarchy as having its foundations in the Franks invasion of Gaul in the fifth century. Foucault
claims these discourses to be new in the sense that they are historico-political, and oppose themselves quite explicitly to the counter-discourse of the jurdico-philosophical conception of the state. An understanding of history, as the field of warfare, is the way in which the abstract justifications of monarchical power by its jurists can be contested. In contesting them, the advocates of the historical approach were engaging in political acts, a quite overt struggle over knowledge to be wielded in a fight against their adversaries. The ‘truth’ of history, then, is something that can only be gleaned historically, and not by recourse to abstract theorising. War runs through history, and history is the history of wars and battles, not of peace.

By the time that Clausewitz writes that ‘war is policy pursued by other means,’ the reverse of this claim has been held to be true for at least a couple of centuries. The discourse of politics as war is, therefore, nothing new. But it is transformed in the Enlightenment, when it becomes, in the hands of the representatives of the Third Estate writing against the monarchy, a combat that takes place between the nation and those elements that are opposed to the nation. For Emmanuel Sieyes in his famous, ‘What is the Third Estate?’, his answer to that question is that it is everything, that it is the nation, or as Foucault shows, that it is what makes the nation possible. The nation, then, becomes universal, and, moreover, to be identified with the state. In opposing the Revolution, Louis XVI and his clerical and aristocratic allies effectively excluded themselves from the universal nation, and appeared as enemies of the nation and the state. The Revolution represents a war in which the right of the nation is re-established, but for Sieyes this ‘nation’ is not now just one order of society, not, as it had been for the reactionary aristocrats, one nation existing within a territory with several nations, but the nation is everyone. Nationality is denied to those who oppose the Revolution—they are simply not recognised as part of the state that expresses the universal will of the nation. What we see here, of course, is the articulation of the modern notion of the nation. It is a notion that draws on the ideas of race struggle that Foucault outlines in his lectures as being constitutive of a historico-political discourse that opposes itself to the legitimising, juridical discourse of royal power or sovereignty. However, at the end of the eighteenth century, the bourgeois or liberal understanding of this historico-political discourse is that it allows us to recognise the point at which national universality brings about a dissolution of all war. War ceases with the casting off of absolutism, and with it goes the relations of domination that had marked all hitherto history.

What occurs in the French Revolution, then, is that ‘politics,’ where it is conceived of, no longer appears as war. Politics is the function of a state that is the representative of the unity constituted by a single nation. War is no longer possible because the combatants have been disarmed, and, in an important sense, the end of the ancien régime marks the termination of that
struggle between different forces for domination that had characterised the
dominance of the West. What we see here is a liberal discourse of politics—or, it
might even be said, anti-politics—that is at work in the writings of Hume,
Smith, Kant, Constant, Bentham and Mill. It recognises the fiction that is the
social contract and the juridical account of sovereignty, and instead asks us to
analyse politics in terms of historical struggle and change. At the same time,
however, it sees in the Third Estate, commercial society, or the bourgeoisie,
the announcement of the end of war. The ‘politics’ that goes on in modern
societies performs or should perform a mainly administrative function, as part
of an economy that is structured by the needs of the nation or the people.
Politics in the modern world is thus not war, but war overcome. What we
have here, then, is not the reinstatement or rearticulation of the juridical
document of sovereignty (though this has by no means disappeared), but rather
the use of historico-political discourse to affirm that the modern state
represents the universality of all, of the nation, and works in the national
interest. We arrive, then, at the liberal conceptualisation of politics as the
very opposite of war.

Yet Foucault is insistent that the discourse of politics and history
constituted by war does not disappear in the wake of the French Revolution.
Rather, the theme of ‘race’ struggle comes to be worked into a ‘state racism.’
This state racism is linked to the emergence of a new ‘technology’ of power
in the eighteenth century that fundamentally differs from the ‘disciplinary
power’ that is the focus of Foucault’s famous book *Discipline and Punish*.
Whereas disciplinary power had as its object the body of the individual and
was concerned with its training and disciplining through everyday routines in
the prison, the clinic, the school and the factory, this new form of power—
what Foucault calls ‘biopolitics’—focuses on the human race, or populations,
as a whole. We move, then, from a concern with the regulation of individual
conduct to a concern with the health of the race or population. The
knowledge that is constructed by this biopolitical power is expressed in the
science of population and health—the statistics of birth-rate, birth control and
morbidity. And in turn, this knowledge functions through the institutions and
practices of medicine and public hygiene. Biopower operates then, as the
name suggests, at both a scientific and political level—it is a political
discourse of biology.

Biopolitics is effectively a politics of life. The theories of
sovereignty that emerged in the sixteenth century attributed to the sovereign
the power over life and death, but we have already said that in effect this
power was negative—it was in the main manifested in the sovereign’s action
of killing (or, more broadly speaking, coercing and punishing). It was the
right of the sovereign to kill and to let live. But with biopower, there appears
a form of power that ‘consists in making live and letting die’—what Foucault
calls, ‘the power of regularisation.’ This regularising power is concerned
with promoting the birth rate, lowering the mortality rate, raising life expectancy, and so on. It does this through instruments that are not disciplinary in character, not focused on training and disciplining individual bodies, but through mechanisms that 'establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field.'

But surely there is a paradox here, for how can we see a discourse that is effectively concerned with preserving and extending life as informing 'state racism,' which is exactly about purging the nation of degenerate racial characteristics, and which, in the form of colonialism and imperialism in the late nineteenth century, is about suppressing and killing other races and civilisations? For Foucault, this is because in the late nineteenth century, a discourse of evolutionism (not, it should be stressed, Darwinism\(^6\)), comes to see history in terms of a struggle for survival between races, with the fittest claiming the ultimate victory. It was in this way that a concern for the political regulation of the biological health of the racial or national population comes to lie at the centre of state racism and a new race war. In this guise, the 'races' are defined not in terms of cultural or social characteristics, as they are for the aristocratic and bourgeois opponents of absolutism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but rather by their biological attributes measured in comparison to those of other races. It is this discourse, combined with an account of how war is necessary both to protect one's population from degenerate elements, but also to expose it to the kind of aggression and violence that will root out its weakest elements and leave the population as a whole fitter, that gives rise to the kind of 'state racism' most obviously instantiated in the Nazi regime. Foucault concludes his analysis in *Society Must Be Defended* with an account of the Nazi conception of power as racial struggle that is articulated both through the mechanisms of biopower (Nazi race science) and an affirmation of the absolute right of the sovereign to kill the enemies of the race—even when those enemies are members of the race.

3. **Contesting Politics as War**

In this section, I want to consider some of the theoretical problems that arise from Foucault’s assertion that politics can be analysed as war pursued by other means. But in doing so, there are two lines of thought that I want to avoid. First, I don’t want to embark on an analysis that is about showing what Foucault ‘really’ meant. As in much of his research and writing, what Foucault was concerned with in his lectures on war and politics was posing new questions and opening up new lines of enquiry. He was not really interested in providing definitive accounts of explanatory concepts, or constructing a master-key for the analysis of social relations. In this respect, it’s not clear that Foucault is trying to provide a definition of the concept of politics, rather than posing questions about what we might understand politics
to be in a simultaneously historical and theoretical sense. The purpose of that understanding is, ultimately, to achieve a better comprehension of the kind of world we live in and the kind of people we are, and by so doing to realise something about how social life can be changed. Second, and strongly related to his point, I don’t myself want to try and provide a definition of the concept of politics or of ‘the political,’ for the reason that there are many different concepts of politics and of the political. The criteria for their evaluation is not a real object called ‘politics’ or ‘the political’ that exists outside of political discourses and practices, but rather the role that they perform in furthering our understanding of how these discourses and practices operate.

There are, then, at least two senses in Society Must Be Defended in which we can understand the notion that politics is the continuation of war. First, we might consider that war is just the central feature of human history and politics, that what most of history is about is the waging of war and the manner in which the victors in war continue to impose their triumph on the vanquished. If we want to understand where we are and what it means to live in the modern world, we have to see ourselves as occupying positions in an ongoing and perhaps immemorial war. That idea, as we have seen, was for Foucault at the heart of what he describes as the ‘historico-political’ discourse of politics that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a response to absolute royal power. This discourse of politics as the continuation of war sees history as a constant series of battles—that, if you like, constitute a seamless war—in which the original conquest is never complete, and in which victory is always fragile and open to reversal by the defeated. In modernity, the juridico-philosophical discourse of sovereignty has sought to disguise this on-going war by seeing the source of sovereignty as lying in its authorisation by free men, and the replacement of force by law.

This discourse of politics as the continuation of war was initiated by the aristocratic and popular opponents of absolutism. But in important respects, many of the most prominent twentieth-century theorists of the relationship between politics and war have adopted some of the central tenets of this historico-political discourse—for example, Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and, more recently, historical sociologists of the state like Charles Tilly. States are seen as having their origins in organised violence, conquest and the subjugation of internal enemies by a victorious monarchy. There is a sense, then, in which the discourse of politics as war, which has its origins in active political opposition to the fledgling absolutist state, might today be employed as an analysis of state-society relations. But we also need to recognise, as Foucault does, that it is precisely this discourse that gives rise to a conception of ‘race struggle’—that the war that underlies political and legal institutions and practices is one embedded in irreconcilable conflict between enemies, enemies defined in terms of their essential differences, whether those be differences of biological race, ethnicity, class or nationality. And in that
sense—and indeed in the work of many twentieth century sociologists and historians of modern state-society and international relations—this discourse sees these categories of identity as existing prior to and as a precondition of war and politics. This is an idea that, along with Foucault, we must contest—such identities can themselves be seen as a product of war and politics.

The identity of the combatants in war is, of course, historically contingent. Today’s enemies may be tomorrow’s allies, and our allies in today’s victory may be our enemies tomorrow. The Reformation and the Wars of Religion in Europe carved out a series of shifting identities that had a central role in the formation of the modern state and state system. The reasons for the emergence of a Protestant movement are complex, but, without questioning the fact that the ‘politics’ of the Roman Church in the sixteenth century had much to do with it, the religious schism in Europe did not map neatly onto existing political and territorial enmities. The power of Protestant ideology to unite and divide (sometimes within the same family) reshaped political organisation and loyalties. At the closing of the Wars of Religion, as Hobbes clearly understood, fatigue with war, both within and between states, had compelled religious antagonists into the acceptance of the right of the sovereign to determine the confession of his subjects—the doctrine of *cujus regio ejus religio* established in the Peace of Westphalia. Westphalia can be seen as representing the triumph of politics—or at least the conception of politics as the sovereign’s legitimate protection of civil order and peace—over war. The subjection of subjects to the sovereign was, in this sense, a real phenomenon, and not simply a justification of royal authority by theorists of sovereignty like Hobbes.

There are, then, good grounds on which we should distrust the notion that politics is the continuation of war if that is taken to mean that politics is simply war in disguise between combatants whose identity is pre-political, or that it is only through war that, historically speaking, we have arrived at the forms of political organisation and identities characteristic of modernity. It is true that for much of the twentieth century, war and warfare were often overlooked in political and social thought, but that is no reason, from the point of view of the analysis of state-society and international relations, to posit the notion of the primacy of war and warfare in the constitution of political modernity. While we do indeed need to bring the war-politics distinction into question, the complete erasure of that distinction distorts the complex character and aetiology of the modern state, its relation to society and the nature of the international system.

The second sense in which we might understand the notion of politics as the continuation of war is in the guise of what Foucault described as ‘Nietzsche’s hypothesis.’ Here, the lines between the historical and the philosophical become blurred as we conceive of all power relations as, in essence, a warlike and unending struggle between contending forces. In this
regard, we have to shift our understanding of politics from the circumscribed realm of the state and its laws, and the relation between state, society and the international system, to all social relations of power. These relations operate in the hinterland of sovereignty, working within and across non-juristic forms of discourse and practice to create subjects of power at the micro-mechanical level. This is the understanding of power relations that is at work in Foucault’s ideas of disciplinary power and biopolitics.

Foucault has been accused by his critics of uncritically embracing a Nietzschean metaphysics of power, and as a result, by logical inference, he should be found guilty of a kind of ethical and political nihilism. But, for reasons that I can’t really elaborate on here, I don’t think this is a compelling criticism of Foucault’s understanding of power relations. Rather, I think the clear attraction Nietzsche had for Foucault was that he showed that identity and resistance to domination and subjugation are formed within relations of power, and not on their outside by virtue of God, natural law or natural reason. The appeal for Foucault of the historico-political discourse of race struggle is that it revealed the myth of sovereignty. The sovereign state does not eliminate the war-like struggle between contending parties that goes on in its territory. Rather, the state is drawn into these struggles, even at its periphery where its laws do not operate. This historico-political discourse provides us with a model for understanding power relations as having the form of war, even if the state does not recognise this, even if it is philosophically justified in terms of rightful consent and its provision of protection in return for obedience. Sovereignty functions to disguise the war that constantly goes on around the state, and which unavoidably draws it in.

On this second understanding of politics as the continuation of war, then, power relations are war-like in character. They involve struggle, and tactics and strategies for domination and subjugation of the enemy. This is not a war of the state on society, or even between states, it is a war that goes on within both the state and society. We’re likely to be averse to this kind of understanding of all social relations of power as the continuation of war because of the way in which we usually talk and think about war. For we often think that war should be defined as a means of action and an instrument of conduct (as, in other words, organised violence oriented towards a rational end, involving specially trained and armed forces, involving rules of combat, etc.), rather than as a relationship between contending parties. However, we also speak of war existing even where there is no violence, because there’s a clear sense that what counts is the war-like relationship. A war-like relationship exists wherever we can identify antagonists and where—crucially—the contending parties recognise themselves as antagonists. And I think this is the sense in which Foucault wanted to employ the concept of politics—or power relations—as the continuation of war, a concern that emerges in his considerations of power. For Foucault was keen to contest the
notion of power as absolute domination. Indeed, power could not operate in the absence of resistance. Domination, in that sense, can only ever be a process of active subjection, of the constant repression of resistance. The subject of domination, on this view, is not a passive and defeated figure, but a resisting agent, using any resources available to it—including those provided by the dominator—in order to contest its status in the relationship.

From a certain point of view, then, we can understand war as an analyser of politics in the sense that social relations are antagonistic in character, and that the constitution of the relationship between the antagonists is a dynamic and contingent process that is never closed or completed. It might be, then, that politics is indeed like war in a certain Clausewitzian sense. On War paints a picture of war and its outcome as dependent on the relation between the warring parties, characterised by the visceral impulse to defeat the enemy, the random play of contingent factors and the rational calculation of means and ends. Clausewitz was writing about war in a particular context and to a particular end. The Napoleonic Wars had brought about a revolution in the organisation and conduct of military campaigns, had mobilised the masses in nations in the waging of war and had introduced the spectre of 'total war.' But Clausewitz’s work is often taken as not simply providing a commentary on the state of war in the modern world, but rather outlining a general philosophy of war. It is in this sense that the form that war takes on through human history—the interplay of the triad of visceral emotion, contingency and reason—might be thought to be at the same time the form of general social relations. The difficulty with drawing such an analogy appears to be Clausewitz’s insistence that war is always the application of instruments of violence to force the enemy into submission. However, what constitutes ‘violence,’ ‘arms’ and ‘force’ in this regard is extremely problematic. If we are talking about a general form of war that may go on in society without the kind of formal hostilities that we have become used to in the age of conflict between the trained military forces of states in the international system, then we may think of many types of instruments of violence, force, coercion, that are employed in the ordering of social relations. It is, therefore, no bar to a general conception of relations of power as relations of war if there is an absence of specifically martial institutions and practices.

Prior to his lectures in Society Must Be Defended, Foucault had explored—via his conception of disciplinary power outlined in Discipline and Punish—the manner in which many social relations and institutions in modernity came to be organised by adopting the same mechanisms of control and surveillance that operated in the training and deployment of soldiers. But what he develops in the lectures in Society Must be Defended departs from this kind of analysis by focusing on the form of war as the form of power relations. It’s in that sense, then, that we might think of Foucault adopting
something of Clausewitz’s philosophy of war. Soldiers, like pupils, workers and the mentally ill, are all made through relations of power. But these power relations, like relations of war, are antagonistic in character, and their outcome is always uncertain. In the final section of the chapter, I’d like to turn towards the status of this claim. What precisely, does it mean to say that we can think of power relations as having the form of war by virtue of the presence of an antagonistic relation between the parties involved? And can we then define politics—or the political—as being in essence defined by the relation of antagonism?

4. The Political, War and Antagonism

Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* makes a famous claim about the character of ‘the political.’ Schmitt presents the political not as a specific institution or set of practices—that which we usually identify with ‘politics’—but as that which makes possible the distinction between friend and enemy. It would be a mistake to regard Schmitt as saying that the political is war, but the political is certainly what makes war possible. War is not simply the playing out of rivalries, competitions or personal hatreds, but rather a conflict that takes place between enemies. The enemy is *hostis* not *inimicus*—i.e., it is the enemy that threatens public safety, that which is entirely alien or opposite to who we are. In that sense, the political is what determines the identity of any group, because such an identity can only be established when ‘we’ have knowledge of who we are not—that which is our opposite and which (potentially at least) threatens our being by its own being.

From this point of view—and as contemporary authors such as Chantal Mouffe have argued—we can see the political as a relation of enmity or antagonism. Mouffe takes Schmitt’s work to demonstrate that the political ‘must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.’ In that respect, we might understand Mouffe as arguing that the political is not a departure of or cessation of war, but rather that the political has the form of war and is the condition for and moment of the constitution of all social life. It is not then, from this point of view, a question of war going on beneath the surface of politics and everyday life. Rather, politics is the continuation of war in the sense that the very social and political identities that form the parameters of all human social conduct are made possible by the constitutive relation of antagonism that is the political. The relation that is definitive of war—the distinction between friend-enemy—is the relation that is definitive of the political.

Mouffe’s understanding of the political is designed to counter liberal conceptions of politics as the suppression or elimination of antagonism. In doing this, however, she presents us with a general metaphysics of social life as constituted by antagonism. If we consider identity as relational, then it is
indeed the case that antagonism plays a central role in its formation: we can only comprehend what we are through the speculum of the other. It is, however, something of a leap from this proposition to the idea that the political should be conceived of as the friend-enemy relation and that antagonism is the ground of social life. Schmitt’s work can indeed be read as an important corrective to the liberal view of politics and the law as the elimination of war and social antagonism. But the notion that the political is the continuation of war because both are at bottom a relation of antagonism, only serves to raise more questions than it answers. One such question is why we should accept this conception of the political in the face of alternative republican accounts, such as that of Hannah Arendt, that stress the difference of the political as the realm of freedom in which human beings act in concert to achieve the public good, to set out and obtain collective goals? In fact, we search in vain for any Archimedean point from which to judge the truth of such philosophical claims about the nature of the political. We may understand the concept of the political either as the condition of the antagonistic constitution of social identity or the condition of public action and collective endeavour. Whether we understand them as such depends on their use and place in any given political discourse.

The critique of a political or social theory can all too easily fall into the construction of a philosophy of the object under consideration that fails to reflect on its own political and social conditions of articulation. I’d like to suggest that Foucault’s analysis of war raises a series of conceptual problems that are not easily answered, but at the same time the kind of analysis he performs allows us to bring into the question the very posing of the philosophical question of the nature of war and of the political. Foucault himself never engaged directly with Schmitt’s work, but we can assume that he would have had some sympathy with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the friend-enemy distinction as outlined in Nick Mansfield’s piece in this volume.11 Derrida argues that Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction is reliant on the existence of the public-private distinction (since the enemy is hostis—the public enemy who may at the same time be a private friend) that can only be brought into being by the friend-enemy relation. Schmitt’s failure here is related to his inability to recognise the problem that lies at the heart of Hobbes’s account of the constitution of sovereign power. For as much as Schmitt looked to Hobbes as legitimating the protection-obedience relation, like Hobbes he takes it for granted that men are already endowed with the capacity to be the subjects of sovereign power. But for men to actually live under law, to accept the protection of the sovereign in return for obedience to the law, can only be possible once men recognise themselves as subjects of the law and of the sovereign. In turn, this requires a knowledge of themselves, of others and their actions.
Foucault, of course, recognises this problem as being embedded in the discourse of sovereignty, one in which Hobbes—and Schmitt—are mired. Schmitt famously rejected the legalistic account of sovereignty by claiming that sovereign power emanates not from the law but from the decision: ‘sovereign is he who decides on the exception.’ But what is not brought into question on this view is the capacity of the sovereign to decide. Schmitt and other critics of the juridical account of sovereignty expose the fallacy of the liberal justification of sovereign power, but in the course of doing so they fail to ask the all-important question of from where the capacity to be sovereign, to make the decision about who constitutes ‘friend’ and ‘enemy,’ is derived. For Foucault, of course, the reality is that the King’s head was cut off a long time ago, and that what it means to be a subject in modern societies is shaped by the plurality of powers that are liminal to the law and sovereignty. From this perspective, the friend-enemy distinction is not the metaphysical precondition of human social life, but is rather constructed in a variety of discourses and practices that are characteristic of—if not, perhaps confined to—modernity.

The politics-political and the friend-enemy distinction are, then, products of the kind of societies we inhabit in modernity, societies in which the ‘public’ is widely expected to participate in contesting ‘politics.’ As Reinhart Koselleck has shown, we may understand the ‘Enlightenment’ as the key moment in the formation of these contesting subjects. The Enlightenment created a public that was equipped with the conceptual armours and moral vocabulary to take on the authority of royal absolutism. But as Foucault indicates in Society Must Be Defended, the knowledge that the ‘bourgeois’ public creates involves not just the identification of the monarchy and the church as the enemy, but anything that is opposed to the nation. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution—and perhaps modernity in general—turn on this recognition of the national will and the defeat of its other, whether that other be an internal or external threat. Identifying the enemy, in this respect, means the creation and contestation of a whole new vocabulary of politics. There is a war over language that, of course, still goes on. Bob Brecher’s chapter in this volume demonstrates one form of contestation of language in the present—the manner in which the term ‘terrorism’ is today employed to both delineate the enemy and to render it politically and morally bereft.

Reading Society Must Be Defended highlights the many potential dangers in constructing a philosophy of antagonism, one which sees, for all intents and purposes, the form of war as being the form of politics or the political. That is not to say that we cannot understand political modernity as being, from one very important point of view, about the perpetual construction of the friend-enemy distinction that takes place in a very broad array of political discourses and practices. But an understanding of the world
requires a demand to look at precisely how specific antagonisms have been constructed through the various concepts, vocabularies, discourses and practices of politics that we have inherited. It is such a project—rather than a philosophy of antagonism—that, I think, Foucault was trying to outline in *Society Must Be Defended*, and if we want to understand how the friend-enemy distinction plays out in the present, I would suggest that this project constitutes a good starting point.

5. Conclusion

How might it be a good starting point? First, and very crudely speaking, the international system can be analysed from the point of view of at least two discourses: one that sees it as the outcome of perpetual conflict between its constitutive, self-interested, units; and the other that sees the system as bound by customary, and increasingly formal, international law. We might, then, see in this a reflection of the distinction that Foucault makes in *Society Must Be Defended* between a historico-political and juridical account of the state and sovereignty. But what Foucault’s analysis can bring into relief is the way in which the international system and the wars that occur within it, are not simply objects of one or the other of these discourses. Rather these discourses are themselves centrally implicated in the functioning of the system and the legitimation of warfare. ‘Realist’ and ‘legalist’ doctrines of international relations and war are positions taken up by contending parties in the crafting of the rules of the system and in the justification given for going to war.

Second, it’s clear that an understanding of ‘war’ in the international system today as armed conflict that takes place between the specialist martial organisation of states under the laws of war is hardly adequate for comprehending the character of international conflict. Nor can we achieve an effective understanding of the international system by viewing it as the product of diplomatic relations between states. While it is important to recognise the continued importance of states and their ‘high’ politics as the major players in the international system, it’s clear that a whole range of groups and conflicts below and across the level of states are central to the way in which global conflict is organised today—from micro-nationalist separatist conflicts, to Maoist guerrillas, to al-Qaeda. If we conceive of such groups and conflicts as operating ‘beyond’ politics, as being fleeting expressions of ancient ethnic rivalry, a commitment to atavistic ideology or fundamentalist religion, then we overlook the importance of liminal conflicts in structuring relations of power in everyday life.

Thirdly, and related to this last point, Foucault’s analysis in *Society Must be Defended* draws our attention to the manner in which everyday ‘politics’ in modern societies operates around a constant vigilance and struggle against the enemy. There is no room here to enter into a discussion
of Foucault’s concepts of ‘biopolitics’ and ‘governmentality.’ However, the regulation of the conduct and behaviour of the entire population in order to preserve and extend life, to protect it from the internal and external enemies, is clearly a central feature of our modern lives. Whether it be the War on Drugs or the War on Terror, we need to be concerned about the profound impact of the enemy—an enemy that is produced and reproduced in the discourses and practices of politics in which we are immersed—on our everyday lives.

Notes

1 Foucault delivered the lectures at the College de France in 1975-6, in between the publication of two of his most famous books: Discipline and Punish (1975), and The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (1976).
3 Ibid., p. 15.
4 Ibid., p. 247.
5 Ibid., p. 246.
6 Ibid., p. 256.
7 This is only partly because the widespread view of Nietzsche as a nihilist is itself wrong. More importantly, Foucault’s interest in Nietzsche, at least in the late 1970s, was clearly focused on how genealogy repudiates the search for the historical origins and metaphysical ground of truth. But this is far from saying that power is all that there is. See M. Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,’ The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought, P. Rabinow (ed), Penguin Books, London, 1984.

**Bibliography**


Foucault and the Continuation of War


**Jason Edwards** is Lecturer in Politics, School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck, University of London. He is author of *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory* (Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2007).