MAD theory: nuclear deterrence and the thanatopolitical limits of Empire

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Introduction

Considerable attention has been turned in recent years to the processes by which war has become globalised. As numerous political commentators have argued, our contemporary era is witness to a new relationship between politics and warfare, one that has dramatically reordered the post-Westphalian system of international state relations in the wake of the Cold War. Obviously, militarised violence has not dissipated in the twenty-first century. Contemporary interest in war has in no small part been sparked by the war on terror and a growing proliferation of political violence across the globe. Warfare has, however, increasingly been oriented around the maintenance or disruption of world peace and order, a form of war associated with neoliberal projects for global governance rather than the territorial strategic objectives of nation states. Much of the analysis of this trend towards new forms of warfare has coalesced around a concern with the biopolitical dimensions of war. Deriving largely from the first volume of Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality and given impetus by the subsequent publication of his 1975–76 lecture series at the Collège de France, Society Must be Defended, the concept has been treated at length by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their Empire trilogy and in the work of Giorgio Agamben in their efforts to understand the operation of sovereignty, globalisation, and modern political, military, and economic structures (Agamben 1998; Foucault 1981, 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2005, 2009). A growing body of work associated with their insights has now developed to explore how war operates in the biopolitical mode as a practice designed to preserve and promote life.

Implicit in much of this work on new wars, therefore, is an acknowledgement that we have seen the end of Cold War era apocalyptic threats of global nuclear annihilation (Cirincione 2008, p.85). Military strategists themselves have been central to such developments, announcing a revolution in military affairs in response to the end of the geopolitical strategies imposed by the Cold War that would see war built around information networks, automated control, and precision munitions (Bousquet 2009). The USA notably undertook a massive programme to reduce its arsenal of nuclear weapons immediately after the First Gulf War (Cirincione 2008, p.69). It is claimed with increasing frequency that nuclear weapons no longer possess any serious threat to the world. Yet however much wars of biopolitics may be seen to have displaced those of geopolitics, the colossal military infrastructure of the Cold War era and its nuclear armaments has remained in place. The world is still confronted by vast nuclear weapons systems constituted by fleets of aircraft and naval ships, satellites, missiles, military bases,
think tanks, military nuclear reactors, and research programmes.

This article questions whether the geopolitics of nuclear war can be entirely dismissed from the biopolitics of contemporary military conflict. It does so by examining one of the few studies to have considered the ongoing significance of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era, Hardt and Negri’s Empire trilogy and their treatment of nuclear weapons in relation to the sovereignty of Empire. Yet although they propose that nuclear weapons play a fundamental role in structuring a global Empire, they nonetheless insist that the deterritorialising operation of biopolitical capital means that the prospect of nuclear conflict has begun to simply fade away. By revisiting an earlier body of philosophical work on nuclear weapons, this article proposes that we can see continuity between their work and an earlier postmodern line of thought on the nature of nuclear deterrence. Drawing on Carl Schmitt as a key figure in contemporary thought on sovereignty, and offering a re-reading of his thought via this earlier generation of thinkers, it will examine the relationship between air power, atomic weaponry, and the political ordering of a global nomos in order to conceptualise deterrence in the present moment. This article proposes that the geopolitics of nuclear deterrence not only continues to underpin the biopolitics of Empire, but that it renders Empire a more indeterminate structure in world affairs than Hardt and Negri suggest, governed by a reigning thanatopolitical geostrategy of death as much as a biopolitics of life. The largely overlooked nuclear dimensions of postmodern theory can remind us of the actuality of that theory, and of the ongoing salience of the nuclear situation that inspired it.

**Empire of deterrence**

In Empire, Hardt and Negri develop a theory of globalisation that moves beyond postmodern political theories they believe were only ever critiquing an already outmoded modernity (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp.139–143). Identifying an emergent globalised world order in which economic processes have come to be thoroughly entangled with juridical and political arrangements, they propose that a new stage in the development of capitalism has emerged with a shift from industrial to cognitive capitalism. Such a shift, they believe, refers to the real subsumption of the social by capital, in which capitalist modes of production penetrate ever deeper into the quotidian fabric of everyday existence. They understand this change by adapting Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, although they develop beyond his concerns with the ways in which the life processes of a national population were surveyed and managed. Instead, they argue that the basis of contemporary capitalist production across the globe has shifted from industry to the global biopolitical production of life itself, to the production and reproduction of information, bodies, intellects, and affects that circulate through the multitude of the world’s population. The social has therefore been entangled in globalised flows that fundamentally reorient national sovereignty. Refusing to see this situation as a post-war American dominance or imperialist expansion, they argue that an entirely new form of sovereignty has appeared. Defined as Empire, it is a form of sovereignty which guarantees the global equilibriums of biopolitical capital development by interlocking networks of finance with international organisations and treaties (Lemke 2011, p.68).

They view Empire as distinct from the classical sovereignty of the nation-state because, being global in nature, it has no outside and lacks any central authority. Rather than a traditional legal structure, it is dependent upon three underlying mechanisms, “the bomb, money, and ether” (Hardt and Negri 2000, p.345). The latter two of these three mechanisms, the flows of global finance and capital, and the massive media and communication networks that encircle the world are issues commonly discussed in relation to globalisation. Almost no attention, however, has been directed at the first of these mechanisms, “the bomb”, or the world’s vast arsenals of thermonuclear missiles. Admittedly, Hardt and Negri decline to discuss the effects of nuclear weapons at length, while, as argued below, they have placed increasingly less significance on the structuring role of such weapons over the course of their Empire trilogy. Their analysis of nuclear weapons focuses simply on the strategy of deterrence that such weapons impose upon the world, a strategy of mutually assured destruction that is significant, they argue, in so far as it prevents nation-states from seeking to resolve international territorial disputes through military force (Hardt and Negri 2000, p.345). This decline in states’ capacity to undertake warfare is, then, seen as central to the construction of a global
form of sovereignty – with sovereign states no longer possessing their traditional monopoly on legitimate violence, so the core foundation of sovereignty has disappeared. Warfare has become absolutely limited in scale, while the last two decades have seen states increasingly deprived of the right to use violence within their own borders (Hardt and Negri 2005, p.26). In its place has emerged a globalised world order in which a balance of power is no longer established through war, but through the deterrence from war.

If Hardt and Negri deal with nuclear weapons summarily, so too their concerns with nuclear deterrence are largely occluded by the increasing focus in their work, particularly in their subsequent Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire, on the operation of new forms of warfare that have emerged in relation to this erosion of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. As they argue, the “ultimate threat of the imperial bomb has reduced every war to a limited conflict, a civil war, a dirty war” and it is these limited conflicts that have absorbed their attention (Hardt and Negri 2000, p.345). They insist that contemporary warfare has come to resemble a militarised police action, a series of highly technologised conflicts fought by multinational coalitions in order to suppress insurgencies, terrorist organisations, or rogue states (Green 2002, p.32). Bearing little resemblance to twentieth-century wars of massive total national mobilisation, war comes to operate instead in the same biopolitical terms as the economy more generally. Rather than the territorial ambitions and geopolitical strategies of states, war is located at the level of the life of the liberal individual and the obligations of humanitarian intervention (De Larrinaga and Doucet 2008, p.518). As they insist in Multitude, war has become a “general matrix for all relations of power and techniques of domination, whether bloodshed is involved or not. War has become a regime of biopower, that is a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life” (Hardt and Negri 2005, p.13).

In Multitude, Hardt and Negri also place a greater emphasis on the operation of biopower, rather than nuclear weapons, as the driving force that has shifted the nature of state sovereignty and war making, a shift in which traditional forms of territorial war and its generalised destruction are coming to “fade away” as political realities (Hardt and Negri 2005, p.38). Rather than viewing this as an effect of the end of the Cold War, they propose that the war itself had served as a passage into this new condition of Empire’s sovereignty, noting in particular the May 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union. By limiting both nations’ capacity to deploy nuclear weapons, the treaty signalled the culmination of the nuclear threat and the commencement of an effective global limitation on traditional forms of inter-state warfare. The treaty itself can thus be seen as inaugurating the end of traditional forms of warfare that focused on the “coherent mega-threat” of enemy military powers and the rise in its place of the contemporary “high-intensity police action” (Hardt and Negri 2005, p.39). In Multitude, then, they emphasise legal structures and economic factors, more than the bomb, as the primary determinates of the new form of sovereignty they describe in Empire. They recognise that nuclear war remains a possibility, yet they insist that the essential problem with power in the nuclear mode is that it continually threatens to destroy itself, to kill the very life that enables power to function. Because Hardt and Negri believe that sovereign power must always depend on those over whom it rules, they view nuclear weapons as ultimately untenable because the use of such weapons would destroy their own base of power. Power striving to operate in this manner simply becomes “stupid” (Negri 2008, p.133).

They argue, therefore, that although nuclear weapons are fundamental to globalisation, these weapons nonetheless posit almost no enduring threat to our globalised world. In the concluding volume of their Empire trilogy, Commonwealth, they in fact decline to mention nuclear weapons at all, opening the book by dismissing what they see as an apocalyptic tone in contemporary political philosophy and a desire to re-impose sovereignty as a central object of analysis (Hardt and Negri 2009, p.3). Such an approach, they argue, fails to recognise the fundamentally biopolitical dimension of global power and its basis in capitalist exploitation of labour, while they conclude that finance is proving to be a more powerful mechanism for controlling the biopolitical economy than war (pp.288–289). Their own work embodies, therefore, their underlying assumption that nuclear weapons will simply fade away as the world becomes increasingly deterritorialised by the global flow of communications and capital.
In this, their work is representative of a more general waning of concern with nuclear weapons. Yet while they ultimately disavow the threat of nuclear war, Hardt and Negri’s work is remarkable for having foregrounded a pivotal role for nuclear weapons in the processes of globalisation. They even went so far in Empire as to suggest that the shift from modernity to postmodernity was nowhere more apparent than in the emergence of the deterrent effect of thermonuclear weapons (Hardt and Negri 2000, p.345). They propose that Heidegger’s turn to technology can therefore be read primarily in terms of the nuclear situation unfolding through the 1950s and 1960s (pp.362–363, n.28). Heidegger had, of course, denied that his concerns with technology were simply a response to the development of nuclear weaponry, yet he did view the prospect of nuclear war as a key marker of the underlying nature of technology, acting as “the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened” (Heidegger 1971a, p.164). Heidegger had argued that technology was not simply an instrument at the service of humans. Far from being under our control, technology represents a way of revealing the world, doing so in modern times by reconstituting the world as a standing reserve that ceases to be given over and beyond the human. That all living things are technically objectified in the drive of modern technology is thus the correlate of atomic physics’ attack on all living things (Heidegger 1971b, p.109). Yet Hardt and Negri nonetheless fail to engage with how nuclear war also figured in a political tradition of postmodern thought that developed in relation to Heidegger’s concerns with technology and the disclosure of forms of life. Thinkers who expanded upon Heidegger’s thought on technology examined nuclear weapons not simply as tools of the Cold War ideological contest, but in terms of the ontological effects of nuclear deterrence on postmodern life. Returning to past theoretical readings of nuclear weapons points up the sense in which, far from having been a historical transition that we have safely traversed and can now safely forget, the nuclear moment is one in which we still dwell.

**Post-apocalyptic postmodernism**

The appalling violence of the twentieth century’s world wars profoundly shattered Enlightenment certainties of human progress and prompted fresh engagement with Western philosophical traditions (Harvey 1990, p.13). For Alan Milchaman and Alan Rosenberg, the Holocaust was, in particular, the central shared element in the thought of major figures associated with French philosophy that fed into postmodern political and ethical theory (Milchaman and Rosenberg 1998, p.3). Imanuel Levinas, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida were all clearly engaged with the philosophical and ethical aftermath of the Holocaust. Derrida, for example, saw deconstruction as a philosophy of deferral that would avoid the logic of the Holocaust, a philosophy in which it would be impossible ever to achieve a “final solution” (Levin 1998, p.275). In his history of Literary Theory, Nicholas Birns proposes that the seminal date for the development of deconstruction may not have been the widely mythologised Paris revolutions of May 1968, but rather May 1945, when Nazi concentration camps were finally liberated and knowledge of the Holocaust began to be disseminated to the world (Birns 2010, p.101).

If full awareness of the Holocaust took time to unfold, however, the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945 was intensely and immediately shocking. The German system of extermination camps, for all its appalling and unparalleled uniqueness, even shares a perverse affinity with the US Manhattan project and its scientific rationalisation and massive political, economic, and scientific mobilisation in an effort to destroy life on an unlimited scale. While in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the USA was the only nation to possess nuclear weapons, an arms race followed from the start of the 1950s that plunged the world into the Cold War of nuclear deterrence. Both the USA and the USSR were soon in possession of thousands of nuclear weapons, including, by the end of the 1950s, thermonuclear “H-bombs”, which increased the destructive power of nuclear weapons up to a thousand-fold and were thus seen by leading nuclear scientists to have rendered nuclear war purely an instrument of genocide (Mian 2004, pp.51–52). August 1968 might equally, then, be part of the mythology of French theory as the date France first successfully tested its own thermonuclear bomb, and hence entered into a world system of nuclear deterrence and complicity in this genocidal logic (Croddy et al. 2004, p.163).
Despite the lack of attention to the role of nuclear war in postmodern theory, a number of thinkers can be seen to have considered its implications. Derrida was, of course, cautious of the "apocalyptic tone" that he saw developing in philosophy through the 1960s and 1970s, yet he nonetheless had argued in *Spectres of Marx* that apocalypse was his generation’s “daily bread” as it confronted the Cold War context of revelations of “totalitarian terror” (Derrida 2012, p.16). Writing in his only direct engagement with nuclear war, “No apocalypse, not now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)”, he concluded that it was under the condition of this catastrophic threat of nuclear war that deconstruction came into existence. Derrida references St John’s Seven Missives of the Biblical Revelations to highlight the long historical Western tradition concerned with apocalyptic forebodings (Derrida 1984, p.21). Yet he argues that things are different in the contemporary era because nuclear war is unprecedented in its “unknowability” and for this reason it is situated within a fundamental paradox. Nuclear war is itself only ever “fabulously textual”, we have no precedence and could have no remainder or record after the event (p.23). Nonetheless, if it could never manifest as anything more than a “fable”, it was one that structured the world; the threats and information circulating within nuclear war were crucial to its operation, casting a shadow of threatened apocalypse over “everything that is named by the old words, culture, civilization” (p.23). It was the prospect of a “total and remainderless destruction of the archive”, that exposed the material precariousness of literature, and so brought to light the very capacity to deconstruct the structures and historicity of discourses (p.27).

Unlike Derrida, Foucault never addressed an essay specifically at the problem of nuclear war. His writing is, nonetheless, pivotally concerned with collapsing distinctions between peace and war as he traced out the historical genealogy of how military practices penetrated into modern civilian society, how war had come to serve as the grounds for thinking about peace. His rejection of political philosophies concerned with sovereignty, however, saw him develop a new conception of war altogether, moving on from what he viewed as a traditional focus on the sovereign right to kill to explore the thanatopolitical dark side of biopolitics, the ways in which a modern politics concerned principally with the preservation of life demanded forms of killing in order to make life live (Foucault 1994, p.416). The end point of this process was generated by the “technology of wars” that “has caused them to tend increasingly towards all-out destruction”, leaving the world in an “atomic situation” where life could only be preserved by exposing a population to death (Foucault 1981, p.137). The threshold of modernity, for Foucault, was crossed when the life of the species was wagered on its political decisions, when man’s politics placed his existence as a living being into question (Foucault 1981, p.143). Although he did not explicitly claim that the possibility of nuclear war marked this threshold, he was aware that nuclear conflict represented a paradoxical limit to the operation of modern biopower; the use of nuclear weapons would, he claimed, destroy life itself and so represent a return of the sovereign right to kill into world politics (Foucault 2004, p.253).

Paul Virilio, in contrast, believed that any such thought about the death of the species was squarely linked to the development of nuclear weapons (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, p.51). Indeed, it was Virilio who most fully developed the nuclear dimension that Hardt and Negri discern in Heidegger’s thought, drawing on Heidegger’s concerns with the impact of technology on modern humanity and what he felt were the fundamental interrelations between war, technology, and speed in the contemporary era (Adams 2010). He saw himself as developing a political economy of technological speed rather than of wealth, locating the ultimate question of speed, or the acceleration of political, social, technological, and cultural processes that define progress, in the speed of competing weapon systems. Heidegger’s focus on the technologically driven age of the world picture was reformulated into what Rey Chow terms the age of the world target (Chow 2006, pp.27–31).

Since the Second World War, Virilio claims, militarised speed has erased the efficacy of any civilian political power. The war had, in effect, moved beyond the nation-state altogether to produce a globalised military alliance, leading to the autonomy of the military within the state as the military itself came to form a new class within society (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, p.39). He argues, in turn, that the war never ended, total war simply turned into the pure war of nuclear deterrence. With the nuclear age, therefore, class warfare had been redirected to a conflict between the civilian and military realms, the military itself...
had assumed political power organised around the absolute technological supremacy of nuclear weapons. The effect, then, was the endocolonisation of the civilian world by the logistics of military preparation, as all social life was redirected into the logic of military supremacy (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, p.107). Virilio even joked during the Cold War that the world could well see a coup undertaken jointly by the American and Soviet militaries (Virilio 1990, p.175). In effect, the Empire trilogy is describing just such a world, in which not simply America’s military, but all modern military power functions to support the equilibria of global biopolitical capital, operating as a vast network that polices the life of the multitude rather than engaging in territorial conflicts against other modern armies. Echoing Empire’s conclusion, Virilio saw nuclear weapons as representing a new form of absolute sovereignty over the world (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, p.71).

Virilio was not only the most prominent theorist of nuclear weapons, his thoughts were also influential upon postmodern theorists more generally. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari drew upon Virilio’s theorisation of weapons systems and their role in history to develop their own engagement with the autonomy of the war machine and its nuclear arsenals. Fascism, they argued, was the result of the war machine taking hold of the state and rendering it suicidal (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp.254–255). Yet fascism itself, they go on, was merely the birth process of the apocalyptic nuclear age, one that produces a fundamentally new form of peace that is marked everywhere by its relation to the military and its production of suicidal nuclear technologies (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.516). Jean Baudrillard also engaged closely with Virilio’s thought and equally sought to theorise the social impact of nuclear weapons, both thinkers arguably more closely aligned as theorists of the “end” rather than as postmodernists (Redhead 2011, p.151). Baudrillard believed that the apocalypse had, in effect, already occurred – the deterrent situation of mutually assured destruction had already left the world separated from any meaningful history, culture, or truth as war became meshed with the play of information (Heffernan 1995, p.171). Deterrence thus operated as the underlying principle of contemporary life, replacing the modern disciplinary society theorised by Foucault with the virtuality of pure simulation, where nuclear weapons represented the apotheosis of the simulacrum – a threat of complete destruction that could only ever operate at the level of a threat (Baudrillard 1994, p.32; Bogard 1991). The world, he argued, had been subject to a “virtual apocalypse”, as the threat of nuclear war and the logic of deterrence had brought history to a perverse and numbing standstill, in which the balance of terror had become the terror of balance (Baudrillard 1989).

Broadly speaking, postmodern responses to nuclear war were concerned with analysis of this “virtual apocalypse”, what Virilio described as the “asphyxiation of a way of life”, or the construction of a thanatological, suicidal culture in which all that used to be called culture was rendered into a virtuality. Nuclear weapons were terrifying, less from the point of view of threatened war than from the special kind of peace that they inculcated (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.516). A distinct strand of postmodern thought can be discerned in this response to nuclear conflict, a philosophy of the end or a post-apocalyptic postmodern philosophy of deterrence. Hardt and Negri even posit that the thought of anti-nuclear activism deserves to be raised to the level of high philosophy (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp.362–363, n.28) Moreover, for all their rejection of thinkers associated with postmodernism, Hardt and Negri share a notable continuity with this earlier body of thought. In viewing nuclear weapons as lying at the foundation of Empire, they develop a similar approach to Virilio or Baudrillard by arguing that war itself achieves an absolute level as nuclear weapons reduce war to the pure production of death, in which the “capacity of genocide and nuclear destruction touches directly on the very structure of life, corrupting it, perverting it” (Hardt and Negri 2005, pp.18–19).

But given the radical shifts in politics since the end of the Cold War, is it still realistic to talk about the continuing effects of a “virtual apocalypse”? Recent calls for a revised nuclear criticism in the humanities have addressed nuclear fears in relation to a second nuclear age, in which the specific issue of war has, however, morphed into new kinds of apocalyptic threats associated with climate change and global pollution (Wallace 2011, p.16). Virilio himself has begun to respond to changes in the forms of warfare towards a more generalised state of violence. Like Hardt and Negri, he believes that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of great “international
federations”, the world has effectively seen the end of an era of traditional, geopolitical warfare linked to the control and contestation of national territory (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, p.13). Globalisation has become, potentially, the new form of total war (p.7). Yet for all that he recognises the demise of traditional warfare, he has not rejected his earlier position on the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons (p.70). He recognises the growing threat of terrorist attacks but he also believes that there is now a renewed nuclear proliferation. The world has witnessed a shift from a pure to an impure state of war, but nuclear weapons are still present and are gradually being possessed by an increasing number of countries. Virilio invites us to consider how these weapon themselves, not merely the East–West rivalries, had a primary role in determining the structure of the Cold War. Such a view can, of course, be accused of technodeterminism and results in Virilio’s highly pessimistic view of technology, but it is precisely in such views on the determining role of weapons systems that it is possible to consider the continuing effects of nuclear weapons and strategies of deterrence.5 Historicising this tradition of postmodern thought is not, then, to relegate it to an outmoded concern with Cold War ideologies, as Hardt and Negri largely do, but to consider further how exactly deterrence operates in our present.

This tradition of thought thus refers us back to a key question of contemporary sovereignty if we follow Hardt and Negri that the sovereignty of Empire is in large part maintained by “the bomb” rather than any formal legal structure. Deterrence is, in other words, still a key structuring principle of the globalised world. Hardt and Negri posit a radically deterriorialised sovereignty, however, one that is freed from the constraints of law and traditional territorial conflicts. Following Virilio’s claim that the absolute weapon had assumed the position of an absolute sovereign, I argue that the bomb has a less stable role to play in structuring Empire than Hardt and Negri propose. Read in relation to Virilio’s concerns with nuclear weapons, their thought opens up question of sovereignty in ways that run parallel to much recent discussion of sovereignty and the law, particular as these have emerged out of engagements with Schmitt’s political theorisation of the sovereign decision and states of exception. If we follow Virilio, however, any sovereign decision is subverted by the absolute speed of modern weapon systems; politics for Virilio is to find ways to slow technological speeds in order to enable political decision making (Virilio 2006, p.163). But Virilio’s thought also raises questions about the nature of deterriorialisation and points to a double movement in modern weapons between deterriorialising and reterrioralising impulses. What emerges from his thought are concerns less with the legality of sovereign decision than questions of what Schmitt terms the nomos, the fundamental relationships between territory and human community and a crucial role that weapons technologies play in forming this historical assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp.435–458).

The nomos of nuclear war

Schmitt’s political theory proposes that a fundamentally territorial dimension governs all human community (Dean 2006). Arguing that power can thus always be understood in terms of “spatial orders of the earth”, he insists that a particular relationship of juridical structures and territory serves to underpin the overall political organisation of any given historical epoch (Jameson 2005, p.200). The nomos thus exists in Schmitt’s thought as something akin to a Marxian mode of production or Foucauldian episteme. Schmitt himself was writing at the collapse of one such epoch at the end of the first half of the twentieth century – an epoch in which, since the fifteenth century, the world had been divided between the lawless zone of the sea on the one hand, and on the other the jus publicum Europaeum and its limited wars that regulated the balance of power (Schmitt 2006). This nomos, he claimed, had effectively bracketed the effects of war within a stable legal structure of war making by sovereign states that mutually recognised one another’s right to wage war.

Although Schmitt traces the gradual erosion of this nomos through the developing liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was also ultimately transformed, he insists, by war’s modern means of destruction – in particular, the destructive capacities brought about by airpower (Schmitt 2006, p.313). This was a development that in effect re-imposed the lawlessness of the sea onto the land because, as Schmitt observes, with airpower the military and those who inhabit the globe begin to exist in entirely different registers. War ceased to be fought between equals, where chance and mutual respect were essential to war, so
that an opponent became nothing more than an object of violent measures (Schmitt 2006, p.320). In turn, he recognised that this shift towards airpower was fundamentally related to atomic and hydrogen bombs, bombs that might one day fall across new lines of amity that structured a new nomos (Schmitt 2006, p.49). Developing an argument that resonates closely with that of Empire, he views the collapse of international norms and law as running parallel with the development of new technologies of destruction. Airpower had reintroduced just war and its totalising approach to military conflict as an intensification of war’s destructiveness. Schmitt’s criticisms of liberalism have, of course, been treated with suspicion because of his valorisation of warfare and associations with Nazi Germany. Yet in order to focus on the technological dimensions in this thought, this article will bracket out his broader political associations and read his treatment of air power alongside Virilio and other thinkers of nuclear war.

To a certain extent, the conception of modern warfare proposed by Virilio could be read as contradicting Schmitt’s geopolitical theory of airpower, because Virilio’s writing is defined by the disappearance of geography (Bauman 2001, p.13). In the traditional logic of military strategy, particularly as developed by Schmitt, the enemy is ultimately defined less by any sense of ideological difference than its spatial difference (Wasinski 2011, p.71). The enemy quite simply occupied and controlled a different territorial space. Zygmunt Bauman argues that formal dominion over a territory is now no longer essential for the ways in which power operates (Bauman 2001, p.13). Space itself, moreover, is no longer central to the conduct of warfare because military technologies largely transcend any spatial limitations. Communications and surveillance combine with the global reach of weapons systems to ensure that geographical distances are erased in military thought (Kristensen 2008, p.252). Rather than war operating in terms of geostrategic borders and front lines, a revolution in military affairs means that any enemy can be targeted and destroyed anywhere on the globe once its location is known. War is ultimately fought, then, at the level of information and sensing; it is constituted by a play of deception, ruses, surveillance, appearances, and disappearances where the primary military goal is simply to locate enemies. At its most extreme, we can follow Baudrillard to insist that war has disappeared into the virtual, reduced to a mediatised event unfolding upon screens rather than a contest governed by competing armies’ territorial movements (Baudrillard 1995).

Yet however much military power may now be exercised in the realm of time, however much territorial dominion has been elided, space remains central to modern forms of war. Modern military forces operate as neo-nomadic institutions, untethered from territorial locality to function through satellites, missiles, air forces, and navies that can move beyond territorial borders to render any point on the globe a target. But although modern militaries operate in such a way as to remake the world into a smooth space of unrestricted movement, this is only so that they can more completely exercise control over the straited spaces of territory (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.530). Militaries may no longer conceive space in terms of grand strategic movements that structured two world wars, but this results in a flexible relation to space rather than a complete disappearance of space as an element in military thought (Hirst 2005). The targeting of the enemy anywhere and at any time implies movement away from a strategic frontline with its continuous control of space, but such military force requires instead the creation of a “localization space” (Wasinski 2011, p.69). Targets only exist if they can be located somewhere – they are only targets in so far as they have, and can be known to have, a geospatial reference point. Contemporary war is a contest fought via information and time, but it continues to apply force in an effort to target and thus control space (Bell 2008, p.225). In a sense, contemporary warfare is defined by the effort to impose presence and spatiality upon an enemy (by analogy we might say more generally, that postmodern thought seeks to defeat its enemies by ascribing presence to them while itself occupying a position of non-presence).

By focusing on this spatial dimension of military action, nuclear weapons can be seen to possess a complex relationship to a contemporary deterrioralised military logic. On the one hand, their enormous destructive power and their intercontinental delivery systems represent the apotheosis of airpower’s capacity to destroy anything, anywhere upon the globe. They are the ultimate expression of the neo-nomadism of contemporary military power and its remote exercise of control over space. But nuclear weapons represent a form of destruction clearly premised upon the sovereign
distinction of spatial orders; their use depends upon the world’s differentiation into separate territories (Van Creveld 2008, pp.274–275). They do not localise their destruction onto an enemy but instead threaten to regionalise or generalise that destruction across an environment or territory. Put into biopolitical terms, we can see that, as Peter Sloterdijk argues, nuclear weapons are a form of modern terrorism that targets territories by threatening to render life unliveable within those territories (Sloterdijk 2009). They operate by threatening to destroy the very possibility of life in a given location or environment, attempting to exert the ultimate “control” over any space, not through its occupation but through its extirpation.6

Virilio observes this double disappearance enacted by the war machine between implosion and explosion, in which the implosive elimination of space through technological speed of weaponry is matched with the potential for an explosive evisceration of matter by nuclear weapons (Virilio 2006, p.150). He observed that deterrence defers the explosive movement, yet it is through this very operation as deterrence that nuclear weapons reveal a paradoxical limit of contemporary global biopolitics. They do not need to eliminate all matter in a global apocalypse to structure space or even simply continue to threaten a localised apocalypse. However much contemporary biopolitical war has become deterritorialised in its humanitarian efforts to protect life, nuclear weapons perpetually reterritorialise warfare by threatening destruction of the very environments that support life. Nuclear weapons reveal what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the fundamentally indeterminate relationship between the war machine and war itself, that the war machine can either be directed against the worldwide axiomatic expressed by the system of states as modern, biopolitical war, or take as its object war itself and its potential for thanatopolitical absolute destruction (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp.465–466). The principle of nuclear deterrence serves to erase territorial sovereignty and its borders, enabling the globalised operation of military power that fundamentally reorients national sovereignty into Empire and makes war take life as its object. Yet, paradoxically, nuclear weapons nonetheless require those same borders of territorial sovereignty in order to have any functionality at all, operating therefore in relation to the pure war of nuclear deterrence.

This reading of Virilio and Schmitt, allows us to see that nuclear weapons are integral to an emerging global nomos because they are situated at a critical juncture in the way that weapons technologies relate to space and territorial sovereignty. Schmitt’s work opened up the possibilities for what might eventuate from this new situation of global order on the basis of airpower and nuclear weapons, but, writing at the start of this process he could see no determinate outcome. He defined, rather, three potential outcomes. The Cold War would lead either to one victor (potentially at the cost of destroying themselves), a new balance between land and sea, or a grouping of independent blocs (Schmitt 2006, p.354). Mitchell Dean notes that these three positions have, in effect, been represented in major contemporary thought – likening the first to Samuel Huntington’s terming of the USA as a lone superpower, the second to Hardt and Negri’s Empire, and the third to Habermas and other “liberal and social democrats” who have prioritised regional associations (Dean 2006, p.15). If we think of distinct global orders in relation to nuclear weapons, however, the outcome of the nomos of earth will be inherently unstable, subject to the fundamentally doubled spatiality that airpower and nuclear weapons impose upon a global order. The underlying premise of the Empire trilogy is that the mega-threats of war will simply fade away under Empire as territory becomes increasingly irrelevant in the global operation of biopolitics. Yet if Empire is a new global sovereignty produced and structured by nuclear weapons, so Empire can never fully coincide with itself, it will remain an incomplete project. These weapons simultaneously establish, and yet establish fault lines within, Empire in which biopolitical security exists alongside rather than replaces a genocidal geopolitical strategy. The war machine continues to operate between these poles.

Deterrence and the corruption of life

Nuclear weapons are routinely viewed as a relic of the Cold War, the destructive tools of an outdated ideological conflict. We miss the significance of an earlier generation of thought if we fail to view nuclear weapons as a weapons system with their own identifiable determinate effects on social life, if we dismiss this earlier era of thought as a Cold
War philosophy and fail to engage with it as a philosophy concerned with the relationship of life, technology, and war. Deterrence, in other words, does not simply represent a stable political homeostasis or an outdated ideological impasse, so much as a continuing operation of control over territory, one that can be viewed as producing the very asphyxiation of life that Sloterdijk identifies in the modern operation of terrorism. Contemporary thought on biopolitics often rejects the relevance of geopolitics, the question of security having now replaced critical thought on strategy. Yet as Hardt and Negri have argued, contemporary biopolitics is conditioned by an underlying strategic rationale associated with deterrent effects of nuclear weapons. In this, they follow on from Foucault in particular, for whom biopolitics was limited and conditioned by what he termed the “atomic situation”.

What they fail to engage with, however, is the way that the strategic implications of nuclear weapons haunted an earlier generation of thinkers who could not simply disavow deterrence as a form of stupidity. We still live in this age of the world target. The sovereign right to kill that Foucault identifies with nuclear weapons may appear to be an implausible, fabulous, stupid, or impossibly suicidal right, yet this suicidal logic can be identified in the nuclear armed state, in which the war machine and what Virilio terms the monarchy of nuclear weapons continually threaten to push the state into absolute forms of war (Foucault 2004, p.253). Modern militaries have fantasised any number of ways to strategically survive such an event, as modern sovereignty seems to fantasise merging with its war machine (Van Creveld 2008, pp.274–282). Cast as a fable, the apotheosis of simulacra, the paradoxical limit of biopolitics, nuclear war and its strategies of deterrence is both a fiction and the most pressing condition transforming a distinctly technologically oriented postmodern life. War today may be fought to make life live, but life is also corrupted by war, nuclear deterrence representing an attack upon the very conditions or environments that make life possible, a way of killing that touches directly on the structure of life, corrupting and perverting life by rendering it into pure terror. The enduring threat posed by these biopolitically outmoded weapons is one critical form by which the history of postmodern thought, also often thought now to be historically outmoded, remains fatally actual.

Notes

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1. For discussion of the obsolescence of war between states, see Haug and Maat (2011), Kaldor (1999), and Van Creveld (1993).
2. See, for example, Dillon and Reid (2007) and Reid (2006).
4. For a broader argument about the historical roots of Postmodernism in the traumatic legacies of the Second World War, see Crosthwaite (2009).
5. For a critique of Virilio’s negative view of technology, see Kellner (1999).
6. See also Hooks and Smith (2005), who argue that weapons of mass destruction are distinct from other weapons systems “because they do not kill by piercing and crushing human bodies; they kill and disable opposing military forces by making the environment uninhabitable. This can be accomplished by chemical weapons that poison the air and water, biological weapons that cause infection, and nuclear weapon that create superheated air and radiation.”
References


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