

The Escalation to Extremes¹

“WAR IS NOTHING BUT A DUEL ON A LARGER SCALE.”²

Benoît Chantre: René Girard, your work is based on literary criticism, the study of religion in archaic societies, and an anthropological rereading of the Gospels and the Jewish prophetic tradition. Nothing, in principle, destined you to become interested in the writings of a Prussian general who died in Berlin in 1831 amidst relative indifference. What sparked your interest in Carl von Clausewitz?

René Girard: It happened relatively recently, through the discovery of an abridged American edition of his treatise, *On War*, and the sudden realization that the Prussian general, as you call him, had intuitions very similar to my own. His ideas enabled me to finally articulate the broad lines of my mimetic theory in its relation to history, particularly that of the last two centuries. Of course I do discuss war in my books, especially in *Violence and the Sacred*,³ but from a strictly anthropological point of view. I could not approach it theoretically, as have done all the great strategists, such as Sun Tzu, Mao Zedong, Machiavelli, Guibert, Saxe, and Jomini. I think that Clausewitz stands alone among such theorists because he was at the turning point of two eras of war and bears witness to a new situation with respect to violence. In this regard, his approach is much more profound and much less technical than that of the others. Thus it was only very recently that I began to see the *end of war* as a subject in itself. The last days of an institution whose purpose was to control

and restrain violence corroborates my central hypothesis, namely, that for about three centuries all rituals and institutions have been crumbling. War, through its rules and codes, also helped to create meaning by establishing new equilibria over an ever growing geographical area. It has generally ceased to play this role since the end of World War II. How did the system suddenly disintegrate? How has political rationality finally become powerless? These questions are vital.

I quickly obtained a complete French translation.⁴ The further I advanced in my reading of Clausewitz's treatise, the more I was fascinated by the fact that the tragedy of the modern world was laid out in those dense and sometimes dry pages, which purport to speak only of military theory. Naturally, I had skimmed through Raymond Aron's book, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*,⁵ when it appeared in the 1970s, but at the time I was too absorbed in my own research to really pay attention. I see now that it was also because Aron's *rationalist* reading prevented me from exploring Clausewitz's text, which says something completely different from what Aron tried to make it say. Aron's brilliant essay is now dated, and he cannot be blamed for that. It was a product of the time, the Cold War, when people still believed in nuclear deterrence and thought that foreign policy had meaning; that meaning has now largely disappeared. This is why I am convinced that we have entered an era when anthropology will become a more relevant tool than political science. We will have to radically change our interpretation of events, stop thinking as products of the Enlightenment, and finally envisage the radical nature of violence; this will produce a quite different kind of rationality, as required by events. This makes reading Clausewitz pertinent today. I trust that others will continue the work for which our conversation will hopefully lay the foundations.

BC: If you don't mind, let's briefly situate *On War* historically before discussing it. Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) was a Prussian officer, son of a military man, and spent most of his time with soldiers. Like all his colleagues, he was proud of his country's recent rise in power, having experienced as a disaster the defeat by Napoleon's army at Jena in 1806. This crushing defeat (King Frederick William III fled into eastern Prussia while the French armies occupied the whole country) revived in officers' minds the humiliation felt at Valmy, when on September 20, 1792, Frederick William II, the successor of his uncle Frederick the Great (Voltaire's friend) saw the Duke of Brunswick order a retreat in the face of a new phenomenon: an army of volunteers supporting a professional army (the alliance of the "culs-blancs" and the "bleuets"), which was to launch the revolutionary expansion across Europe.

RG: Let's not forget that Clausewitz was in the Duke of Brunswick's army at the Battle of Valmy. I read somewhere that apparently he immediately saw the importance of that battle, which was in fact nothing more than a cannonade. Yet this was when the French army became revolutionary: instead of fleeing in panic, as they had done two or three times before, the French stood firm. The Duke of Brunswick was the one who retreated, but without any major losses. I think that all historians agree on this. They also agree about the extraordinary importance of the event because it was from that point on that the Revolutionary Army became effective. The volunteers from Marseilles, who had come to join professional soldiers at Valmy, were not content with simply giving France a national anthem: they announced a new era, that of total mobilization. Indeed, Jena was one of Napoleon's fastest victories: he toppled the adversary in three minutes.

BC: Clausewitz was very quick to see the newness of a populace in arms and the novelty of military conscription. Note that the principle of revolutionary expansion was adopted in the November 17, 1792 Convention. It precedes the policy of the Committee of Public Safety ("no freedom for the enemies of freedom," proclaimed Saint-Just), which, beginning in March 1793, enabled the Revolutionary Army to occupy Belgium and the Rhineland. The clinging to its conquests, which was to provide some of the Revolution's decisive acquisitions, determined Napoleon's policy and his rush to establish a continental embargo from Russia to Spain to counter England and its hegemonic commercial aims.

RG: These events have to be kept in mind in order to understand why Jena was so traumatic in 1806. Prussia, which had been experiencing the military pride of an upstart, saw its system of political centralization destroyed by a single blow. Everything had to be rebuilt and set on new foundations. Clausewitz, who deserted his country from 1811 to 1814 and joined the Tsar's army because of the temporary alliance between the King of Prussia and Napoleon, lived until the end of his days in the hope of a reform, which was initially led by Scharnhorst. The reform became impossible owing to Frederick William III's reactionary policy after the Congress of Vienna. No constitution was adopted in Prussia. The philosophical dreams of Frederick the Great, the "enlightened despot" of the eighteenth century, were utterly abandoned.

It has been said that Clausewitz inspired Kutusov's strategy. However, he ended his career rather sadly, as Director of the Berlin Military Academy, where he was kept from teaching towards the end. His colleagues never forgave him for being right about pursuing the war, especially since the

engagement proved legitimate. Clausewitz was unable to play the political role he would have liked. Consequently he drew lessons from the exceptional military events, and meditated until his death on the unfinished treatise that his wife published posthumously. It seems that Clausewitz considered only the first chapter of Book 1 to be finished. As a result, often it is only the first pages that are quoted, the ones taken from Chapter 1 of Book 1 “On the Nature of War,” which summarize the book as a whole.

BC: The first chapter, entitled “What is War?,” is in fact fundamental. It is the chapter that Clausewitz reworked a few years before his death, in 1831, and in which Raymond Aron tried to see a desire to rethink everything in a more political, less warlike sense. Aron went so far as to say that there is a break between Chapter 1 of Book 1 and the rest of the treatise, and that Chapter 1 is a whole unto itself.

RG: As I am sure you agree, this poses major problems. We have to examine this insistence on a “break.” It is as if Raymond Aron did not want to see the unity of the work, which, from my point of view, the later rewriting did not challenge. Indeed, I think that the tone of the treatise is recognizable right from the beginning in Chapter 1. The tone, and the tension in it throughout the treatise, is essential.

BC: He begins with a definition of war . . .

RG: . . . as a duel.⁶

BC: Let’s quote him:

I shall not begin by expounding a pedantic, literary definition of war, but go straight to the heart of the matter, to the duel. War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale. Countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it as a whole can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance.

*War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*⁷

RG: We will return to the definition, but note that it is followed by a comment that is not intended to reassure the reader:

Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that

must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst.⁸

What is Clausewitz telling us? Two things: first that he was living at a time when what has been called a “gentleman’s war,” namely that of the eighteenth century, had been abandoned; and second that the indirect approach is a mistake proceeding from kindness of heart. The latter affirmation proves, unsurprisingly, that Clausewitz was ignorant of Chinese strategy, which aims specifically at winning battles before they are begun. However, it is also a clear judgment on his part: the foundation of indirect strategy (that of maneuvers rather than battle) is often an admission of weakness. Intelligence must thus serve force, since it is no longer a question of controlling it:

The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect. If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand. That side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent toward extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war.⁹

This leads to his striking definition of a duel as a “trend to extremes,” which immediately suggested to me what I call mimetic conflict. The realities of war entail that “hostile feelings” (battle lust) always ends up overwhelming “hostile intentions” (the reasoned decision to fight).

Even the most civilized of peoples, in short, can be fired with passionate hatred of each other. . . . The thesis, then, must be repeated: war is an act of force, and *there is no logical limit to the application of that force*.¹⁰ Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes. This is the *first case of interaction and the first “extreme”* we meet with.¹¹

It was this passage in Clausewitz’s text that really gripped me. Suddenly I had the impression that he held the key to understanding the tragedy of the modern world. I am now convinced that Clausewitz is a major author, but for reasons that are very different than those alleged by Raymond Aron. I have to admit that his definition of a duel both fascinates and frightens me because it is consistent with my analyses and applies them to history with a force that I had not imagined.

BC: Unlimited application of force is the first reciprocal action that Clausewitz mentions in his definition of a duel. After that, there are two other types of reciprocity that result in two trends to extremes: the “aim to disarm the enemy” (shared exponentially by both camps) and “maximum exertion of strength” (the increasingly shared desire to destroy).

RG: Suddenly, in section 11, Clausewitz seems to contradict this first apocalyptic definition. Or, rather, he seems to assert that this conception of war (which he did not hesitate to call “optimistic”) implies such tension and takes the imagination to such extremes that we finally lose sense of what is real. This is very surprising. We suddenly come back down from ideas to reality, from the violent reciprocity of the duel to the peaceful reciprocity of what Clausewitz called “armed observation.”¹² From this point on, Clausewitz tries to fill the cracks that he had opened. The “trend to extremes”¹³ is subsequently defined as a “logical fantasy,” a pure concept that does not correspond to historical reality. Note in passing that it seems as if Clausewitz regrets it. He thus separates the concept from reality for theoretical reasons that would enable “absolute war” to subsume all conflicts, from the most warlike to the most political: the idea of war as a duel thus becomes a point of reference. All the ambivalence of Clausewitz’s thinking is in evidence here. Clausewitz does not say that reality is separate from the concept, but that real wars *tend towards that point*.

Raymond Aron, however, based his demonstration on the fact that “absolute war” is *nothing but a concept*. This introduces an unbridgeable abyss between the concept of war as a duel and real war. He was writing in 1976 and we had just begun the last decade of the Cold War, the era in which politics managed to hold in check a nuclear apocalypse. Aron reflected ideas of his own time, not Clausewitz’s thinking. Aron stoked the dying embers of Enlightenment rationality, which was certainly admirable, but unrealistic.

BC: Yet Raymond Aron did follow the text closely. It is as if in Clausewitz’s thought the human mind was unable to imagine the worst, to take the art of war to its “perfect” state, and reciprocal action therefore had to be thought of in the space and time of “real” wars.

RG: Indeed. The brutal passage from one extreme to the other, from concepts to reality, from violent reciprocity to peaceful reciprocity is quite mysterious. However, I am not at all convinced by Raymond Aron’s interpretation of it. We could also say that in Clausewitz’s time the conditions were not ripe for the “trend to extremes,” that he was not facing an apocalypse, but that we are tending more and more towards that absolute state of affairs which we find in his first definition of war. We could say that humans are in a sense not yet

able to match real war with its concept, but that they will succeed some day. This is one possible interpretation of the text. This is what I immediately felt, which is why I have the strange impression that Clausewitz, after his brief and frightening apocalyptic epiphany, returned, sobered, to ordinary, grim reality:

But move from the abstract to the real world, and the whole thing looks quite different. In the abstract world, optimism was all-powerful and forced us to assume that both parties to the conflict not only sought perfection but attained it. Would this ever be the case in practice? Yes, it would if: (a) war were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world; (b) it consisted of a single decisive act or a set of simultaneous ones; (c) the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about.¹⁴

First, however, “war is never an isolated act,”¹⁵ because the adversary is known, we already have certain views about him, and he is not considered an abstraction. Second,

War does not consist of a single short blow. . . . [T]he interaction of the two sides tends to fall short of maximum effort. Their full resources will therefore not be mobilized immediately.¹⁶

Further on, Clausewitz notes that the “very nature” of the forces involved (military power, terrain, and alliances) and the use that is made of them “means they cannot all be deployed at the same moment,” and that therefore “the very nature of war impedes the *simultaneous concentration of all forces*.” He adds,

The fact in itself cannot be grounds for making any but a maximum effort to obtain the first decision But it is contrary to human nature to make an extreme effort, and the tendency therefore is always to plead that a decision may be possible later on.¹⁷

What then happens? The adversary simply *imitates* the other side:

The tendency toward extremes is once again reduced by this interaction.¹⁸

Finally, and this is the third point, war does not lead to an absolute decision, but always to a relative result. Calculation of probabilities thus replaces apocalyptic imagination: we act on the basis of what we know from “the enemy’s character, from his institutions, the state of his affairs and his general situation.”¹⁹

BC: Can’t we conclude from this that, in real war, it is the adversary’s *differences* that have to be imagined, whereas in “theoretical” war, in which reality would match the concept and where the “tendency toward extremes” would prevail, the differences would shade off in a way that is favorable to both unity of time and unity of place?

RG: That’s it exactly. The “trend to extremes” is indeed imaginable only “theoretically,” in other words, when the adversaries are rigorously similar. Let’s say, framing the idea in terms of mimetic theory, that the conditions of *undifferentiation*²⁰ did not yet obtain in Clausewitz’s time, but that they will perhaps one day. This explains the obligation to identify laws that apply in real wars, where “the political object now comes to the fore again.” Clearly, Clausewitz is straining here; he is trying to go against his own nature, and to reassure the reader in a way. Aron used Clausewitz’s corrections of the first chapter to try to reconstruct the rest of the treatise as Clausewitz *would have written it* if he had not died of cholera in 1831. You have to admit that this is striking. All of Raymond Aron’s humanist faith is in evidence here, but also the limits of his argumentation.

This is why we have to return to the text, to section 11 of Chapter 1 in particular, where Clausewitz writes that once we have gone past the “logical fantasy” of the trend to extremes, the “political object now comes to the fore again.” Clausewitz is thus trying in his revised text to imagine war as contained by politics, but it is clear that war regains the upper hand, so to speak. Take the first and last paragraphs of the section, and see the difference in tone. First, the return of politics:

A subject which we last considered in Section 2 now forces itself on us again, namely the *political object of the war*. Hitherto it had been rather overshadowed by the law of extremes, the will to overcome the enemy and make him powerless. But as this law begins to lose its force and as this determination wanes, the political aim will reassert itself. If it is all a calculation of probabilities based on given individuals and conditions, the *political object*, which was the *original motive*, must become an essential factor in the equation.²¹

“The less involved the population” the more the political object reappears,²² in other words, in Clausewitz’s terms, when “hostile intention” dominates “hostile feeling.” However, the problem is in fact that “the recent wars,”²³ namely, the Napoleonic Wars and the “total war” that they launched, in which all of a nation’s “masses” were mobilized with a view to war alone, had changed the rules of the game. The trend to extremes thus returns, in the unforeseen face-off between two nationalistic hatreds:

The same political object can elicit *differing* reactions from different peoples, and even from the same people at different times. . . . Between two peoples and two states there can be such tensions, such a mass of flammable material, that the slightest quarrel can produce a wholly disproportionate effect—a real explosion.²⁴

The formulation is not anodyne. Let us go now to the conclusion of the section:

Generally speaking, a military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is reduced, be reduced in proportion; this will be all the more so as the political object increases its predominance. Thus it follows that without any inconsistency wars can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation.²⁵

What does this mean if not that the political object is weak when the masses are indifferent, and that it is strong when they are not? In other words, that politics follow in war’s footsteps? Despite Raymond Aron’s rationalism, passions do indeed rule the world, and the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars released them. A principle of war, which had until then been latent and contained, was released, or perhaps we should say “almost released,” for real wars were not *yet* exact replicas of the concept. The Congress of Vienna led to relative stability in Europe until the war of 1870 and the explosive events in 1914. I say “relative stability” because the colonial massacres, organization of the proletariat as a “fighting class” and social Darwinism’s influence on thinking set the stage for a global catastrophe in the twentieth century. War leads to war, even when, from Jena to Moscow, Napoleon was always desperately seeking peace, mobilizing more of his country each time, each time raising more troops. What if that was the “World Spirit” that Hegel saw pass under his window in Jena? What if it was less the writing of the universal into history than

the twilight of Europe, not a theodicy of the Spirit, but a formidable undifferentiation in progress. This is why Clausewitz both intrigues and frightens me.

RECIPROCAL ACTION AND THE MIMETIC PRINCIPLE

BC: Perhaps we can say that if politics follows on the heels of war, we have to think of reciprocal action *both as what provokes the trend to extremes and as that which suspends it?* If so, then perhaps the independent engine of history is imitation of a model who becomes an imitator in turn, which leads to escalated conflict between two rivals, in other words, the reciprocal action that you call “double mediation” in your books?

RG: You are right to identify reciprocal action with the mimetic principle. Violent imitation, *which makes adversaries more and more alike*, is at the root of all myths and cultures. This seems to be the principle that Clausewitz saw reappearing. The implications of this remark are enormous. You are taking a big leap, but it is possible. “Reciprocal action” (*Wechselwirkung*)²⁶ is obviously a concept borrowed from Kant’s table of categories,²⁷ but it can be transposed into the domain of intersubjectivity, more precisely, into that of mimetic anthropology, based on the relations of reciprocal imitation among humans.

Mimetic theory contradicts the thesis of human autonomy. It tends to relativize the very possibility of introspection: going into oneself always means finding the other, the mediator, the person who orients my desires without my being aware of it. When we are speaking of military automatism and interactions between opposing armies, such tools work well. With respect to total war and totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, we have spoken of “militarization of civil life.” This is a terrible reality and proves that something new has indeed happened. The Napoleonic Wars were the jolt that caused this change in European societies. I even think that this militarization is one of the factors of undifferentiation that is in its process of completion, now that we have turned the page on regulated, codified conflicts. Terrorism is the culmination of what Clausewitz identified and theorized about as the “partisans’ war”: its efficiency comes from the primacy of defending over attacking. It is always justified as being only a response to aggression, and is thus based on reciprocity. Reciprocal action and the mimetic principle concern the same reality, even though Clausewitz, strangely, never spoke of imitation. Moreover, in the next section he notes that “what we are talking about is not the progress made by one side or the other but the progress of military action as a whole.”²⁸

War is a total social phenomenon. In this respect, Clausewitz's analysis is a precursor of Durkheim's sociology. Clausewitz has things to teach us about "mass" violence and contagion.

I'm going back to your comment, which seems to me to be very accurate, about the fact that reciprocal action *simultaneously provokes and suspends* the escalation to extremes. This is indeed one of the consequences of imitation, namely, to have these two opposite effects. This ambivalence is fundamental, and helps to see interaction as a principle unique to humans. Reciprocal action will trigger the escalation to extremes if the unity of time and space is realized, which is what Clausewitz means when he writes about an "isolated act," a "unique" and "complete" decision whose results are absolute.

However, reciprocal action is also what can suspend the escalation to extremes and act as the hidden engine of "real war" as opposed to "absolute war": we enter into the play of various computations regarding the adversary's intentions, calculation of probabilities, etc. Reciprocal action is thus at once exchange, trade and violent reciprocity. As Clausewitz writes in section 13, "If action would bring advantage to one side, the other's interest must be to wait."²⁹ Real war is thus different from absolute war because it takes into account the dimensions of space and time: location, climate, various "frictions," fatigue, etc. It follows that the two adversaries will not move towards the extremes and will not respond to each other in the same way at the same time and in the same place. To what extent is such postponed combat a victory of the political or what Clausewitz called "armed observation"? That is what requires scrutiny.

BC: At this point in Clausewitz's argument, he introduces the "principle of polarity," which is also known as the zero-sum game: "the victory of one side excludes the victory of the other."³⁰ This is what Clausewitz called war of the "first kind" in his note from 1827, which indicated where he thought the treatise needed to be reworked: "The objective is to *overthrow the enemy*, to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please."³¹ War of overthrow clearly waters down the apocalyptic tone of "absolute war."

RG: Naturally, we will have to come back to Clausewitz's last corrections, which were attempts to soften the concept by rubbing it against reality. We have to try to understand his intentions. Note in passing that it is always Napoleon who is behind the idea of overthrow and "total war." Clausewitz is incredibly obsessed by Napoleon, who functions precisely as what I call a model-obstacle: a model that is attractive and repulsive at the same time, and is the source of the mental pathologies that Dostoevsky has described so well.

Clausewitz is not alone here. For example, consider the two kings of Spain, Charles IV and his son Ferdinand, at Napoleon's feet in Bayonne, destroying each other before the person who was then dominating Europe. It is a display of hysteria that could almost have come out of *The Possessed*. Napoleon was extraordinarily strong, and seemed to dominate every situation. There was talk of his "clemency" at Jena after his victory over Frederick William III in 1806. In fact, the emperor was trying to win Prussia's good favor, even after he had entered Berlin and the King had fled to Königsberg. He avoided acting like a tyrant and capitalized on his victory. He was thus both detested and admired by the Prussians, with whom he soon made an alliance against Russia. This is very important: such ambivalence is an essential part of a *model*. First attracted by the genius of the man he called the "god of war," Clausewitz later violently rejected him, and joined the Tsar's armies after the defeat at Jena. The entourage of the King of Prussia later reproached him for this, but would he have been Clausewitz if he had remained in Prussia? Napoleon's proximity and the very idea of collaborating with him against Russia might have driven him crazy. He finished his career in Berlin, where he worked on his treatise until his death. We must not lose sight of the profound resentment he must have felt as a man who could not play the political and military roles to which he aspired.

I do not know how he would have reacted if he had read Victor Hugo. It is interesting to compare their attitudes. Clausewitz had a vehement passion for Napoleon; he was, to use my own concepts, in a relationship of *internal mediation* with the emperor, while Hugo had a much less intense relation with him. Internal mediation supposes the nearness of the model in time and space, which was precisely the case of Clausewitz with respect to Napoleon. Hugo was only four years old in 1806 and was not at Jena. In this respect, Clausewitz is more profound and interesting from my point of view, because he is much more mimetic. He thought *against* Napoleon, in both senses of the word. See how fruitful resentment can be, and how it can make one "theorize."

Clausewitz predicted totalitarianism: the potential for that pathology resided in the way that he wanted to *respond* to Napoleon. There is something very deep in the reality of resentment, the modern passion *par excellence*, as Stendhal and Tocqueville saw, as did Nietzsche in a way, even though he was aiming at the wrong target. I am also thinking about Part Two of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. All these people are extraordinarily similar. What this makes us see about Clausewitz is his Napoleonic side, but he also gave us the means to see something completely different. Yet his analyses of

“reciprocal action” are so enlightening only because mimetism is gnawing away at him.

It is therefore true that reciprocal action both *provokes and suspends* the trend to extremes. It provokes it when both adversaries behave in the same way, and *respond immediately* by each modeling his tactics, strategy and policy on those of the other.³² By contrast, if each is speculating on the intentions of the other, advancing, withdrawing, hesitating, taking into account time, space, fog, fatigue and all the constant interactions that define real war, reciprocal action then suspends the trend to extremes. Individuals are always interacting with one another, both within an army (which explains Clausewitz’s long analyses defining the qualities of a war leader, to which we will return below), and of course between opposing armies. Reciprocal action can thus be a source of both undifferentiation and of differences, a path to war and a road to peace. If it *provokes and accelerates* the trend to extremes, the “friction” of space and time disappear, and the situation strangely resembles what I call the “sacrificial crisis” in my theory of archaic societies. If, on the contrary, reciprocal action *suspends* the trend to extremes, it aims to produce meaning and new differences. However, for reasons that I have tried to describe many times in my books, everything seems to indicate that violent imitation is the rule today, not the imitation that slows and suspends the flow, but the one that accelerates it. Ongoing conflicts provide many disquieting examples of this. We are beginning to see that the reduction of a conflict is only apparent, and leaves open the possibility of its even more violent return.

Clausewitz’s realism provides him with a glimpse of the mimetic principle at the heart of human interactions. He did not advance a theory about it because he needed to talk about attacking and defending, tactics, strategy, and policy; he needed to justify his presence at the Military Academy. Whence the importance of focusing on his first chapter, which is fascinating because it is so contradictory. In it, Clausewitz drew the lessons of his reflections. The chapter is a whole in itself, but not because it contradicts the rest. All the rest comes out more readily than Aron thinks. I am persuaded that Clausewitz is more important for anthropology than for political science. This is why I find in his thought the potential for what has always interested me *as an anthropologist*: theories about the continuous, not the discontinuous; about undifferentiation, not differences. For example, in section 14 we find:

If this continuity were really to exist in the campaign its effect would again be to drive everything to extremes. Not only would such ceaseless activity arouse men’s feelings and inject them with more passion and elemental

strength, but events would follow more closely on each other and be governed by a stricter causal chain. Each individual action would be more important, and consequently more dangerous.³³

We should not be misled by his use of the conditional here. The threat of the escalation to extremes, which is one with the *continuity* of war, is always latent behind the discontinuities of real wars (maneuvers, hesitation, negotiation, halts, etc.). Clausewitz must thus have felt that “reciprocal action,” understood as an accelerated oscillation of like to like, which I call the mimetic principle or principle of reciprocity, is all the more dangerous when it appears uncloaked in the light of day. When differences between adversaries alternate with increasing rapidity, such as in the passing back and forth of *kudos*, the sign of victory among the Greeks that I mention in *Violence and the Sacred*,³⁴ in other words, when the belief of adversaries in their difference from each other produces the alternation of defeats and victories and approaches reciprocity, then we are nearing what I call the sacrificial crisis. This is the critical point when the group borders on chaos. Put nuclear weapons in the hands of the belligerents, and it will no longer be just the group, but the whole planet.

I thus define reciprocity as the sum of non-reciprocal moments. It can be seen only by someone who is outside the conflict because *from the inside you must always believe in your difference* and respond more and more quickly and forcefully. From the outside, the adversaries look like what they are: simple doubles. This is when war resembles its concept, when *there is a unity of alternation and reciprocity*, an accelerated oscillation of differences, and a kind of shift to abstraction. This “logical fantasy” clearly mesmerizes Clausewitz; it is undeniable. It is as if while meditating on the defeat at Jena in 1806, when he wanted to *respond* to Napoleon by enrolling in the Tsar’s armies, he made an essential discovery. I therefore want to reverse your earlier remark and say that reciprocal action, which *used to suspend* the escalation to extremes in the time of “the wars of gentlemen,” accelerates it now that it is no longer hidden. *The mimetic principle is no longer hidden but appears in broad daylight*, and Clausewitz was a key witness to this. Christianity played a crucial role in this revelation, even though it has worked like a time bomb: the Gospel texts “prophesy” a reality that will increasingly be that of our own history. Because the mimetic principle can be seen and differences are vacillating with increasing rapidity, we can see from our vantage point that history has speeded up over the last three centuries. It is impossible to understand Clausewitz if we overlook this dimension of reciprocal action, which is present from the beginning of his treatise.

ATTACK AND DEFENSE: SUSPENDED POLARITY

BC: It is striking how your analyses in *Violence and the Sacred* overlap with Clausewitz's first intuition that, in a way, "real wars" mask "absolute war," towards which they are constantly tending. This is like the alternation of victories and defeats that masks reciprocity and towards which that very alternation of reprisals is tending with every reprisal and counter-reprisal. In your theory, as in that of Clausewitz, it is as if one polarity masks another more terrible one, and the succession of zero-sum games leads, through acceleration of reciprocity, to the "extermination" of the adversary.

RG: Indeed, the polarity is not simple but quite complex. An attack by one adversary does not necessarily lead to the defeat of the other. This explains the need to study the relationship of attack to defense, and brings us to sections 16 and 17 of Chapter 1 of Book 1. The attacker often secures only a *temporary* victory over the defender. Clausewitz concluded that "Polarity, then, does not lie in attack or defense, but in the object both seek to achieve: the decision."³⁵ Napoleon constantly had to attack and to mobilize more and more forces. The defender, by contrast, can prepare a decisive counter-attack that is more deadly than the attack. This is the point, and the only point, where polarity applies. This point is absolutely fundamental, and here we are touching on Clausewitz's second great intuition, which takes the form of a paradox: *the attacker wants peace but the defender wants war*.

Jacques Bainville's book *Napoleon* is full of remarks by Napoleon that support this interpretation. For example, on the eve of the Russian campaign, the emperor said:

But although I do not wish for war, and am far from wishing to be the Don Quixote of Poland, I have at least the right to insist on Russia remaining loyal to the alliance.³⁶

Napoleon thus embarked on a slippery slope that forced him to control a whole continent with an iron fist in order to maintain his strategy of establishing an embargo against England. Alexander I secretly wanted war and to return to trading with the English, so he broke the Tilsit agreements, and Kutusov let Moscow burn in order to prepare the defeat of the Grande Armée. In order to understand this, we have to skip to Chapter 7 of Book 6, entitled "Interaction between Attack and Defense":

Consider in the abstract how war originates. Essentially, the concept of war does not originate with the attack, because the ultimate object of attack is not fighting; rather, it is possession. The idea of war originates with the defense, which does have fighting as its immediate object, since fighting and parrying obviously amount to the same thing. . . . It is thus in the nature of the case that the side that first introduces the element of war, whose point of view brings two parties into existence, is also the side that establishes the initial laws of war. That side is the defense.³⁷

The defender is thus the one who begins and finishes the war. By the nature of its fortresses, armies and command, the defending side determines what the attack will be. It has the choice of terrain and the support of the people, and benefits from the fatigue experienced by the attacking side, whose initial momentum gradually weakens. Finally, it decides when to counter-attack. It thus controls the game, in accordance with the rule that it is always easier to keep than to take. From this we can conclude that the concept of defense *encompasses* that of attack, and that it is the most apt to make real war consistent with the concept of war. Clausewitz repeatedly writes “*beati sunt possidentes*.” Note that this is quite consistent with mimetic theory: the model (the side that will have to defend itself) is the one in possession of something that the adversary tries to take (or take back). It is thus the one that dominates and *ultimately* dictates its rules to the other. The escalation to extremes also involves what I have called double mediation because it is always difficult to know who attacks first: in a way, it is always the one that does not attack. This is exactly the same as in some criminal cases where the victim, much more than the accused, is the real guilty party. When violence is involved, wrongs are always shared. Alexander I fascinates Napoleon as much as Napoleon fascinates him.

The *mimesis* of appropriation, which dictates the attacker’s behavior, nonetheless implies a *response*, and that will be the counter-attack, a means of defense. There will then also be defenses on the side that has to ward off the counter-attack. Clausewitz provided a clear description of this. Yet it is still the “initial” defender that dominates. This, and only this, is the point at which the principle of polarity applies: absolute polarity prepared by relative polarities. We should speak less of the risk of self-destruction and more of the triumph of violence when we consider the primacy of defense over attack. Violence will increasingly dominate: this is the principle of the superiority of defense. Thus, Clausewitz did not advocate total war, as Liddell Hart, his most critical commentator in the twentieth century, thought.³⁸ Instead, he showed

that the defender “dictates the rules” to the attacker, which is very different, though the result is the same. In this regard, Clausewitz sees very clearly that *modern wars are as violent as they are only because they are “reciprocal”*: mobilization involves more and more people until it is “total,” as Ernst Jünger wrote of the 1914 war.

And history did not take long to prove Clausewitz right. It was because he was “responding” to the humiliations inflicted by the Treaty of Versailles and the occupation of Rhineland that Hitler was able to mobilize a whole people. Likewise, it was because he was “responding” to the German invasion that Stalin achieved a decisive victory over Hitler. It was because he was “responding” to the United States that Bin Laden planned 9/11 and subsequent events. The primacy of a defensive position is consistent with the appearance in a conflict of the principle of reciprocity as a suspended polarity in the sense that victory will not be immediate, but will be total *later*. The one who believes he can control violence by setting up defenses is in fact controlled by violence. This is very important. It means that reciprocal action both provokes and suspends the escalation to extremes at the same time. It is perhaps a characteristic of the escalation to extremes to grow *gradually*, in a manner much more formidable than in the case of an immediate counter-attack, which can lead quickly to negotiations. This is the paradox that Clausewitz gives us the means to study: that of a non-immediate immediacy, of a polarity that is more threatening because it is suspended. Bainville certainly felt this, even though he did not talk about it in the way we are doing now:

It took quite a fortnight for Paris to know what was happening in St. Petersburg. The age of the telegraphic ultimatum, of instantaneous mobilizations, of the irreparable brought to pass within a few hours, had not yet dawned. Each of the emperors pursued his “evolution” far from the other, and before the final impact came nearly two years went by.³⁹

Yet the battle, *because it was suspended*, was only more terrible. It prefigured another Russian campaign in the twentieth century, when Hitler reproduced the same mistakes as Napoleon. At that time, Stalin placed large portraits of the Tsar and Kutusov in his office. The old Russia thus resurfaced from beneath the upheavals of communism. Mimetic theory, as it is corroborated here by reciprocal action, obliges us to see history on a larger scale and as involving very long alternations. Napoleon was not yet entirely in “the age of the telegraphic ultimatum.” He still had a foot in the time of eighteenth century wars, but the accelerated era was also *already there*, and Clausewitz

was one of the first to see it, at a time when suspended conflicts no longer dissimulated the underlying principle of reciprocity. Violence is never lost on violence. It cannot be eliminated. This is the fundamental reality that we need to understand.

This also contains a major discovery in anthropology: *aggression does not exist*. Among animals, there is predation, and there is doubtless genetic rivalry for females. However, among humans, the fact that no one ever feels they are the aggressor is because everything is always reciprocal. The slightest little difference, in one direction or another, can trigger the escalation to extremes. *The aggressor has always already been attacked*. Why are relations of rivalry never seen as symmetrical? Because people always have the impression that the other is the first to attack, that they are never the ones who begin, though in a way they are *always* the ones. Individualism is a formidable lie. We make others understand that we recognize the signs of aggressiveness which they manifest, and they in turn interpret our posture as aggression. And so on. There comes a time when conflict breaks out, and the initiator places himself in a weak position. The differences are so small at the beginning, and fade away so quickly that they are not perceived as reciprocal to each other, but as always unique to themselves. To think, as Clausewitz seems to have done in Chapter 1, about war as “the continuation of policy by other means” is thus to *lose sight of the intuition of war as a duel*, in other words, to deny the notion of aggression and response to aggression. It is to forget reciprocal action that both accelerates and suspends the escalation to extremes, which only suspends it in order to further accelerate it later.

Humans are thus always immersed in order and disorder, in war and peace. It is becoming more and more difficult to draw a line between the two realities that, until the French Revolution, were codified and ritualized. There are no differences anymore. Reciprocal action is so amplified by globalization, the planetary reciprocity in which the slightest event can have repercussions on the other side of the globe, that violence is always a length ahead of our movements. Violence steals a march on politics, and technology escapes our control, as Heidegger showed. Therefore we have to study the conditions for this escalation to extremes, from Napoleon to Bin Laden, in which attacking and defending have been promoted to the rank of the unique engine of history. This is why Clausewitz is fascinating, both attracts and repels, and frightens. Victory can no longer be relative; it can be only total. The principle of polarity is the very movement of suspended catastrophe. When Clausewitz speaks of the possibility of a “war of extermination,” we have to understand it in the sense that the twentieth century has given to it. In this respect, one

polarity masks the other, or rather, the “polarity” of which Clausewitz speaks masks the polarization that I try to describe in *Violence and the Sacred*. In the past, it focused on a victim whose destruction made a return to order possible. Today, it is of a piece with the escalation to extremes because there can no longer be unanimity about the guilt of victims.

For Clausewitz, this polarity means the return to peace, in the sense in which “eternal peace” can mean that of the cemetery. This is why we must always see reciprocity behind alternation, “absolute war” behind “real war,” even though reciprocity and absolute war are apparently only abstractions. After all, the apocalypse is nothing more than an abstraction made real, reality made consistent with its concept, and we have to have the lucidity to say that humanity itself tends towards annihilation. This is the implacable law of the duel, spelled out in the primacy of defense over attack. In this respect, humans are different from animals, for the latter succeed in containing their violence in what ethnologists call networks of dominance. Humans cannot control reciprocity because they imitate one another too much and their resemblance to one another increases and accelerates.

We have to imagine that *for these very reasons* the first human groups self-destructed. However, those groups were small and did not interact with the rest of the world. The apocalypse is a real threat today on a planetary level because the principle of reciprocity has been unmasked and the abstraction has become concrete. This is what Clausewitz immediately saw, before taking refuge in a description of the rules of war as if we were still in the eighteenth century, as if war were still an institution. However, seeing states as adversaries, *which is a means of dissimulating the notion of duel*, was already outdated in his time. This announced the unleashing of violence.

Clausewitz does and does not say this. He is ambivalent. However, Sophocles too was ambivalent when he discovered reciprocity in *Oedipus the King* and tried to make us believe that Oedipus was actually a little bit guilty. No, Oedipus was innocent. The guilty party was the group. Violence looks terribly frightening when we have understood its laws and grasped that it is reciprocal and will thus *return*. How did small archaic societies deal with it? They found a solution: they invented sacrifice without knowing it, unconsciously, by channeling their violence onto a sacrificial victim, and necessarily unaware of the arbitrariness of their choice. In order to escape crisis, they always had to turn their reciprocal violence into polarizing convergence of all against one. Every time, the outside point of view (which sees reciprocity) and the inside point of view (which *wants to see* only differences) had to coincide but remain separate. Then all would turn against a single individual.

War of extermination

BC: Is there some way out of the crisis at a time when, according to you, the mimetic mechanism is spiraling out of control at the global level and there can be no sacrificial resolution? Unless the sacrificial resolution . . .

RG: . . . coincides with the disappearance of humanity itself. Yes, that is a *possibility*. This is something that the genocides in the twentieth century and massacres of civilian populations have been telling us. This is the polarization that is masked by the polarities of war, the relative victories that always lead to other more violent wars. Of course, there were genocides in ancient history, and entire civilizations disappeared, but that happened in a sort of eternal return of religion with an apparently inexhaustible power of renewal that no longer operates today. I have a lot of trouble formulating the intuition that I feel is nonetheless very important: once unbridled, the principle of reciprocity no longer plays the unconscious role it used to play. Do we not now destroy simply to destroy? Violence now seems deliberate, and the escalation to extremes is served by science and politics.

Is this a principle of death that will finally wear itself out and open onto something else? Or is it destiny? I do not know. However, what I can say is that *we can see the growing futility of violence, which is now unable to fabricate the slightest myth to justify and hide itself*. This is indeed the escalation towards undifferentiation that Clausewitz glimpsed behind the law of the duel. Today's massacres of civilians are thus simply sacrificial failures, proof that it is impossible to eliminate violence through violence, to expel reciprocity violently. Convergence onto scapegoats has become impossible, and mimetic rivalries are unleashed contagiously with no possibility of warding them off.

Conflict resolution often fails when two groups "tend towards extremes." We saw this in the Yugoslavian tragedy and in Rwanda. We have much to fear today from the confrontations between the Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq and Lebanon, and hanging Saddam Hussein has only accelerated the process. From this point of view, Bush is the very caricature of what is lacking in politicians, who are incapable of thinking apocalyptically. He has succeeded in only one thing: demolishing a form of co-existence more or less maintained between brothers who have always been enemies. The worst is now likely in the Middle East, where Shiites and Sunnis are escalating to extremes. The escalation could just as well take place between Arab countries and the Western world.

Note that it has already begun: the exchange of attacks and American "interventions" can only accelerate, as each side responds to the other.

Violence will continue on its way. A conflict between the United States and China will follow: everything is in place, though it will not necessarily occur on the military level at first. This is why Clausewitz finally took refuge in politics, and hid his original intuitions. The escalation to extremes is a completely irrational phenomenon that only Christianity explains because over 2000 years ago it revealed the inanity of sacrifice, and regardless of those who still like to believe in its usefulness. Christ took away humanity's sacrificial crutches and left us before a terrible choice: either believe in violence, or not; Christianity is non-belief.

BC: What you are saying proves to those who reject your theory that it is not as abstract and "systematic" as they would like to think, but on the contrary bears concretely on events that are occurring right now. It could be a key to understanding certain historical phenomena, for example, what Ernst Nolte and François Furet glimpse, sometimes using concepts close to your own, though they do not take their explanations to their logical conclusion.

RG: Indeed, we should mention *The European Civil War* by Ernst Nolte⁴⁰ and *The Passing of an Illusion* by François Furet.⁴¹ These two historical analyses provide excellent descriptions of situations to which I think mimetic theory provides the key. Ernst Nolte speaks constantly about what I call "model-obstacles"⁴² with respect to the mimetism that closely links Bolshevism and Nazism, and which he argues makes Nazism a mimetic response to Bolshevism. This is precisely what mimetic theory calls a model-obstacle, and it is a crucial historical discovery. Yet Nolte lacks the anthropological point of view, which would help him formulate his intuition better. François Furet, who unlike Nolte has no nationalistic assumptions, is much more convincing when he goes back to the 1914 war to try to understand the mechanism.

However, we actually have to go back several thousand years. This is the effort we have to make to discover what violence is all about. This is why there is an anthropological interpretation of original sin: original sin is vengeance, never-ending vengeance. It begins with the murder of the rival. Religion is what enables us to live with original sin, which is why a society without religion will destroy itself. Vengeance does not exist among animals; they never place themselves in such danger. Only the conjunction of intelligence and violence makes it possible to speak of original sin and it justifies the idea of a real difference between animals and humans. This constitutes the greatness of all religions, with the exception of Christianity, which abolishes the provisional function of sacrifice. Sooner or later, either humanity will renounce violence without sacrifice or it will destroy the planet. Humanity will be either in a state of grace or in mortal sin. Thus, we can say that religion