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Warfare in the 21st century
Models of social order in discussion

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Abstract

The article examines the evolving relationship between warfare and social order in contemporary society. The authors explore how modern conflicts, influenced by technological advancements and geopolitical shifts, reflect and impact models of social organization. They categorize current warfare into several types, including cyber warfare, global terrorism, hybrid conflicts, proxy wars, environmental conflicts, and insurgent movements. These new forms of conflict blur the lines between war and peace, challenging traditional concepts of social order. The study pays particular attention to Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW) and cognitive warfare, which use advanced technologies and information manipulation to destabilize societies. By analyzing these developments, the authors highlight the need to reassess existing social models and ethical frameworks to address the complexities of modern conflicts. The article underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understand and manage the changing nature of warfare and its implications for social order.

Keywords: social order, paradigm, fifth generation warfare, cognitive warfare

Sommario. *La Guerra nel XXI secolo. Modelli di ordine sociale in discussione*

Questo articolo analizza l'evoluzione del rapporto tra guerra e ordine sociale nella società contemporanea. In particolare, gli autori analizzano il modo in cui i conflitti moderni, influenzati dai progressi tecnologici e dagli spostamenti geopolitici, riflettono e influenzano i modelli di organizzazione sociale. Essi classificano la guerra attuale secondo diverse tipologie, tra cui la guerra cibernetica, il terrorismo globale, i conflitti ibridi, le guerre per procura, i conflitti ambientali e i movimenti insurrezionali. Queste nuove forme di conflitto offuscano i confini tra guerra e pace, mettendo in discussione i concetti tradizionali di ordine sociale. Lo studio presta particolare attenzione alla guerra di quinta generazione (5GW) e alla guerra cognitiva, che utilizzano tecnologie avanzate e manipolazione delle informazioni per destabilizzare le società. Analizzando questi scenari, gli autori evidenziano la necessità di rivalutare i modelli sociali e i framework etici esistenti per far fronte alle complessità dei conflitti moderni. L'articolo evidenzia inoltre l'importanza di approcci interdisciplinari per comprendere e gestire la natura mutevole della guerra e le sue implicazioni per l'ordine sociale.

Parole chiave: ordine sociale, paradigma, guerra di quinta generazione, guerra cognitiva

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> The wisest were just the poor and simple people. They knew the war to be a misfortune, whereas those who were better off, and should have been able to see more clearly what the consequences would be, were beside themselves with joy.
>
> Remarque E. (1982). *All Quiet on the Western Front.* New York*:* Ballantine Books, p. 12.

1. Current changes in war-like patterns of social order[1]

The slow transformation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine into positional warfare hints at a highly unstable stalemate. As prominent political analysts and journalists have argued (Kagan, 2023), in light of the upcoming U.S. elections in which Republicans are reluctant to further fund Ukrainian defense, and by virtue of the only partial deployment of military forces in both the Russian and Western camps, the possibility that the situation could be subject to rapid and unpredictable changes is considered remarkably plausible.

Precisely by virtue of the unpredictability inherent in this overall picture and the return to open warfare in the European arena - an eventuality that until two years ago was considered unlikely and anchored in bellicist cultural legacies of the past possibly applied only in "peripheral" scenarios - a sociological reflection on the most current social models and their implications for modern conflicts appears to be more than necessary in order to shed light on the worldviews at play, the prevailing theoretical orientations and the modes of interaction among the collective actors involved.

From the early 2000s to the present, conflicts have seen a significant evolution by virtue of ongoing geopolitical upheavals, but also as a function of the new opportunities afforded by technological advances and global cultural, institutional and relational changes. Among the various differentiations identified to date, it is possible to enumerate those most frequently used in:

1. *Cyber Conflicts and Cyber Warfare*: to denote all those confrontations that take place in the cyber space and may include attacks on critical infrastructure, dissemination of disinformation, theft of sensitive data, and sabotage via malware or ransomware (Kosenkov, 2016; Springer, 2015). These are conflicts that, by their very nature, are characterized by asymmetry and the fact that they can be conducted remotely, often making it difficult to identify responsibility for the attacks;
2. *Global Terrorism*: to identify all those acts of extreme violence designed to promote a

[1] This article is the result of the two authors' joint work. Nonetheless, for a more detailed task division, Romina Gurashi wrote par. 1 and 5 while Shkelzen Hasanaj wrote par. 2, 3, and 4.

political, religious, or ideological agenda through the instilling of fear in a much larger population than those directly affected (Childs, 2023). Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, combating these kinds of global operations has become a security priority in many Western countries;

3. *Hybrid Conflicts*: combining conventional military tactics, irregular operations, and criminal actions, along with efforts in information and cyber warfare (Danyk and Briggs, 2023). These conflicts often mix state and non-state actors and can occur across multiple domains (physical and virtual) simultaneously;
4. *Proxy Wars*: in which one or more countries support third-party groups (such as rebels, insurgents, or mercenaries) in a conflict against a common enemy (Bernat, Gürer and Kozera, 2023) without direct involvement. This type of warfare allows supporters to achieve geopolitical goals while maintaining a low profile and limiting risks (Moghadam, Rauta and Wyss, 2023).
5. *Environmental Conflicts*: which emerge from disputes over natural resources (such as water, rare earths, and minerals) or are exacerbated by the effects of climate change. These can range in intensity from localized tensions to outright wars that often involve a combination of state and non-state actors (Bartolucci and Gallo, 2017, p. 158-224; Fisher, 2022).
6. *Insurgent Movements:* which deploy against an established authority, aiming to overthrow preestablished power through the use of force (Soguk, 2017). Unlike traditional civil wars, these movements can be characterized by unconventional strategies and broad popular support, often in response to perceived injustice or oppression.

As is already apparent from this concise enumeration, a common ground for all these organizational models of conducting conflict concerns the growing importance of technology, information, and unconventional strategies not only in shaping more or less open or latent hostilities, but also in managing internal and regional security. It follows that warfare once characterized primarily by direct confrontations on the battlefield is increasingly shifting to other arenas related to the information, economic, cultural, and

cyber domains to the point where the distinction between "state of war" and "state of peace" is becoming increasingly blurred and less obvious.

Changes, these, that induce a continuous reconceptualization of the contents, modalities and meanings associated with war, making it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when we move from conflict to war or, to put it another way, the exact moment when a state of peace ceases to exist and a state of more or less open hostility begins. In this context, it seems useful to ask ourselves how contemporary wars differ from those of the past, whether the evolution of wars has been linear or exponential, and on what cognitive paradigms today's most accepted theories on the organization of warfare rest.

By virtue of the many conceptual differentiations set forth above and the impossibility of accounting for everything, the objective of this article is to shed light on the main models of social order and research in the field of hybrid wars, with particular attention to the critical issues posed by fifth-generation wars (5GW) and, even more specifically cognitive wars. As is well known, these are two theoretical orientations that have overlapping profiles but are implemented with substantial differences in the Asian and NATO worlds. Through a survey of the existing literature, an attempt will be made to outline of these two different orientations to the same paradigm of warfare in order to highlight the socio-cultural implications that determine the investment in research in either field.

2. From classical wars to the wars of the 21st century

The understanding of the phenomenon of war and its organizational-institutional dimension has occupied a central place in the thinking of many thinkers: from the philosophers and strategists of the past to classical sociologists to modern military theorists, the question of deepening the causes, purposes and modes of conflict interaction has run longitudinally through the thinking of most of them.

Traditionally, war was perceived as a direct confrontation between nation-states, characterized by pitched battles in which military force was the decisive element for victory

(Clausewitz, 1976). This classical concept of war, centered on the use of brute force as a continuation of politics by other means in order to resolve conflicts between nations, dominated the understanding of armed conflicts until the modern era. Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini, both military strategists, were important in this regard. Clausewitz, in fact, explored the nature of war, emphasizing its connection with politics and the need to implement "flexible" strategic choices that would allow the organization of belligerent action to be reshaped according to contingencies, while Jomini (2004) focused on the importance of geometric lines and scientific principles in the conduct of war. His emphasis on formations, strategic points, and lines of communication offered a more mechanical and predictable view of conflict than advocated by his contemporary Clausewitz.

Equally important, then, were the contributions of sociologists such as Simmel and Weber. The former (Simmel, 2003) had read war as a form of social interaction that, despite its destructiveness, could also generate social cohesion and contribute to the definition of group boundaries, while the latter (Weber, 1995) had argued that war (and more specifically World War I) should be interpreted in relation to the development of the model of social order proper to the modern state. In this sense, war became a means for the creation and consolidation of the nation-state through the assertion of the will to power and its supremacy in the international context.

The common ground of all these visions reported here was that war represented «the most violent form of conflict» (Gallino, 2006, p. 343) involving the use of physical force to achieve political, territorial or other kinds of goals. Three, then, were the main elements of this paradigmatic orientation:

1. *war as a political tool*: that is, as a last *resort* to achieve results that could not have been achieved through diplomatic mediation and peaceful methods;
2. *armed conflict and confrontation in the field*: that is, the use of military force and direct violence[2] as forms of interaction between the contending parties;
3. *the establishment of specific, tangible goals*: these included control of territory,

[2] On the concept see Galtung (1969).

change of governments, defense against external aggression, or the realization of specific national interests such as the establishment or consolidation of a certain model of social order.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, the nature of warfare has changed dramatically behind the impetus of innovations introduced as early as the two World Wars and later consolidated by the advent and continuation of the Cold War. The end of bipolarity led to greater complexity in international relations, with a resurgence of competition among major powers such as the United States, Russia and China. Privileged terrains of competition then became the race for technological supremacy and the control of natural resources, which, for this very reason, also became primary causes of conflict. The purposes of conflicts have also become more multifaceted, including the desire to influence the psychological dimension and public opinion, political decisions at the global level, in addition to traditional territorial and supremacy objectives. All this reflects a recognition of global interdependence and the importance of not only military, but also economic, political and informational-social dimensions in conflicts (Betts, 1994).

As "new wars" theorists have not failed to note (Kaldor, 1999; Duffield, 2004), this is the period in which conflicts of a different nature from the civil wars of the past also arise. In what Kaldor and Duffield call “new wars”, the social organization of conflict is redefined through an unprecedented centrality of “ethnic identity politics”, combat methods that are inspired by guerrilla warfare, the prominence of armed groups (among which it is possible to identify paramilitary groups, criminal groups, mercenaries, affiliates of local *warlords* etc.), and the use of different economic tools such as self-financing through illegal trafficking (of human beings, weapons, drugs, metals and/or precious stones), remittances from abroad or raids and looting (Maniscalco, 2016, pp. 74-77). This is the progressive institutionalization of conflicting modes of organization that rest on cultural principles and models of social, economic and political order quite different from those of the past.

Still during the 1990s, then, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) school began to focus on the transformative power of communication technologies in initiating what it had begun to call “netwar”, A

phenomenon that, in the wake of today's prevailing globalization and digitization, has further accelerated the evolutions of warfare already mentioned, initiating the emergence of additional new forms of reorganization of conflict that further challenge the models considered. Cyber warfare, international terrorism, hybrid wars and asymmetrical conflicts are just some of the contemporary manifestations of warfare that deviate from the classical model of confrontation between states (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1993; Hoffman, 2007). These new types of conflict often involve non-state actors, exploit advanced technologies for offensive and defensive purposes, and operate in a gray area between "state of war" and "state of peace", making it difficult to apply traditional international legal and political instruments.

Digitization has definitely transformed the battlefield, introducing the dimension of cyberspace as a priority arena for cyber warfare. Cyber operations can strike at a nation's critical infrastructure, cripple financial systems, spread disinformation and influence public opinion. All of this is possible without direct physical confrontation (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1993). This aspect highlights a fundamental change in the very nature of warfare in that the power to influence and control information now becomes as important as conventional military force.

This is yet another paradigm shift that now turns toward an interpretation of warfare as "unrestricted warfare" (Liang and Xiangsui, 1999). Scholars within this theoretical framework argue that the battlefield of the future will be ubiquitous and that wars will no longer be limited to purely warlike challenges. On the contrary, they involve the integrated use of complex and diverse tools and strategies that affect – simultaneously or at different times – very different industrial, cultural, political and social sectors. «War is moving out of the boundaries of bloody slaughter and showing a trend toward low casualties, or even no casualties, despite its high intensity. It is information warfare, financial warfare, trade warfare and other completely new forms of warfare, which open up new areas in the domain of warfare. In this sense, there is now no domain that warfare cannot use, and there is almost no domain that does not have an offensive model of warfare» (Liang and Xiangsui, 1999, pp. 198-199). The key idea is that almost any aspect of modern society can be exploited as a

weapon in a conflict context, making traditional paradigms of warfare obsolete once and for all and paving the way for new and endless offensive possibilities.

3. The Fifth Generation Warfare (5WG) paradigm

In the groove of these studies on the changing organizational and social patterns of warfare in the 21st century also fits a paradigm particularly in vogue today, that of Fifth Generation Warfare. This paradigm has its roots in the theoretical orientation developed by William Lind, Keith Nightingale, John Schmitt, Joseph Sutton, and Gary Wilson entitled *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation* (1989), but it represents-at the same time-a further advancement of it. If Lind and his colleagues, in fact, had adopted an evolutionary reading of war whereby they interpreted this social phenomenon as essentially characterized by four fundamental moments of change, Robert David Steele, first, and Donald Reed, later propose a further sequencing:

To the four stages proposed by Lind *et al*. (1989) namely:

1. *First Generation Warfare (1GW)*: portrayed as a time of intense conflict characterized by the massive use of infantry, marching in dense formations and engaging in pitched battles according to relatively rigid and predictable principles, was a model of social organization where battle lines, linear and column formations, typical of 17th to 19th century armies (Keeley, 1996) helped transform the army from mass and war machine;
2. *Second Generation Warfare (2GW)*: emerging with World War I and marking the introduction of trench warfare and the intensive use of artillery, machine guns, and later tanks and aircraft (Van Creveld, 1989) helping to transform conflict from movement warfare to position warfare;
3. *Third Generation Warfare (3GW)*: which developed with World War II and saw the emergence of maneuver warfare or *blitzkrieg*, or the speed, surprise, and coordinated use of several combined forces-tanks, motorized infantry, and close air support-to

quickly penetrate enemy defenses and disorganize its forces (Weigley, 1973);

4. *Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW)*: shifting the focus from nation-state conflicts to asymmetrical conflicts, where non-state groups use guerrilla tactics, terrorism, and remotely controllable technologies against technologically superior states (Lind *et al.*, 1989, p. 24) in order to achieve special political and/or economic interests or subvert the existing social order;

Robert David Steele[3] and Donald Reed (2008) now include an additional moment:

5. *Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW)*: which is distinguished by its use of advanced technologies, emphasis on cyber warfare, and manipulation of information in order to influence, misinform, and subdue the opponent without necessarily resorting to conventional physical force (Singer and Friedman, 2014).

The 5GW thus represents the paradigmatic outpost from which to study 21st century wars as it aims to reflect on strategies to destabilize societies through information warfare, cyberwarfare, and the use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

One of the main characteristics of 5GW is the extensive use of disinformation and propaganda techniques aimed at influencing public opinion and undermining the social cohesion of adversaries. Along with cyberwarfare, which includes attacks on critical infrastructure and the use of cyber-weapons (Krishnan, 2023), attacks aimed at influencing public opinion and social order may include the dissemination of false information, manipulation of social media, and other forms of digital propaganda. These tactics aim to create confusion and division not only among the public, but also among experts and policy makers, making it difficult for the enemy to respond effectively.

Decentralization of military operations is another hallmark of 5GW. Unlike conventional warfare, which is conducted by national armies with a clear chain of command, 5GW operations can be carried out by non-state groups, hackers, activists, and other entities operating independently but in a coordinated manner. This decentralization makes 5GW extremely fluid and difficult to counter with traditional military techniques (Shabbir *et al.*, 2020).

[3] See Abbott (2010).

Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, are used to gather intelligence, analyze behavior, and predict the enemy's moves. These technologies enable 5GW actors to conduct highly targeted and personalized operations, maximizing the effectiveness of their disinformation and cyber-attack campaigns (Sepulveda and Smith, 2019).

In addition, 5GW exploits the vulnerabilities of modern societies, such as dependence on technology and political polarization. 5GW operations can target these weaknesses to destabilize governments and undermine trust in democratic institutions. For example, the use of disinformation campaigns to influence elections or create panic during a health crisis are typical 5GW tactics (Reed, 2008).

The 5GW thus poses a complex challenge for governments and traditional armed forces, requiring new strategies and technologies to counter threats that do not occur on the traditional battlefield. In addition, this implementation orientation of confrontational warfare is widely prevalent in the Asian context where regional specificities influence how this form of interaction is implemented and its objectives.

The specificity of 5GW in Asia is also related to regional geopolitics, where historical rivalries and ethnic and religious tensions provide fertile ground for unconventional warfare operations. Political polarization and fragile democratic institutions make Asian countries particularly vulnerable to 5GW tactics, which exploit these weaknesses to destabilize governments and create internal divisions (Mustafa *et al.*, 2021).

This is, for example, the case in Pakistan, which is constantly seeing its internal balances challenged by agitational actions taken by other actors in Balochistan, a region that enjoys an excellent strategic location and ample natural resources and which, for these very reasons is the subject of actions aimed at creating discontent among the local population and a sense of deprivation.

In a diametrically opposed position, India exploits 5WG to pursue its own geopolitical interests. India's 5GW operations include targeted disinformation campaigns against Pakistan aimed at isolating the country internationally and undermining its internal stability.

4. A specific kind of 5WG: Cognitive Warfare

In the complex framework of the 5WG outlined so far, a particular and even more devious way of implementing conflict actions has begun to attract NATO's attention, we are talking about cognitive warfare.

If 5WG employs unconventional, asymmetric, economic, and cyber warfare strategies to destabilize the adversary, cognitive warfare seeks to exploit the cognitive vulnerabilities of individuals and societies for strategic advantage.

The latter, in fact, can be defined as the set of strategic operations that aim to influence the perceptions, beliefs and behaviors of individuals and groups through the manipulation of information. Making use of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, neuroscience and cyber-psychology, proponents of cognitive warfare seek to create confusion, spread misinformation and polarize enemy societies. According to the NATO Innovation Hub document, cognitive warfare is based on the convergence of "Cyber-Psychology", "Weaponization of Neurosciences" and "Cyber-Influence" to alter the world perception and rational analysis of military, political, and other strategic decision-makers in order to alter their decisions or actions and gain strategic advantage at all levels of tactical intervention (Claverie *et al*., 2022).

Key features of cognitive warfare include information manipulation, deliberate disinformation, psychological influence, and psychological warfare. These operations aim to exploit human cognitive vulnerabilities, such as cognitive biases, emotions and beliefs, to guide public opinion and behavior. For example, through disinformation campaigns on social media, cognitive warfare actors can radicalize individuals, polarize society, and create internal divisions that destabilize democratic institutions and social cohesion. Cognitive warfare is distinguished by its ability to operate simultaneously on multiple levels, affecting individuals, groups and entire societies, making it an extremely versatile and pervasive form of conflict.

The purposes of cognitive warfare are multiple. First, it aims to gain strategic advantage by destabilizing the enemy without resorting to traditional armed conflict. This may include

weakening command and control structures, creating uncertainty and fear among civilian populations, and threatening the political and economic stability of a nation. Second, cognitive warfare seeks to influence the strategic decisions of adversaries by leveraging distorted or false information to manipulate decision-making processes. Finally, it can be used to bolster one's power and legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, by presenting the cognitive warfare actor as a dominant force and capable of controlling the global narrative.

In the face of these specifications, it is therefore possible to try to systematize the knowledge gained so far through a summary table (Table 1) that allows us to compare the more general features of 5WG and the more particular features of Cognitive Warfare.

Table 1. Comparison of the aspects and characteristics of 5WG and Cognitive War

Aspect	Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW)	Cognitive Warfare
Focus	Leveraging technology for strategic gains	Influencing minds and perceptions
Objectives	Disrupt and destabilize without direct conflict	Alter beliefs, create confusion
Tactics	Cyber warfare, information warfare, economic warfare, unmanned systems	Disinformation, propaganda, PSYOPS, media manipulation
Key Players	Advanced state actors, technologically capable non-state actors	State and non-state actors (military, intelligence)

Source: table is an elaboration of the authors Gurashi Romina and Shkelzen Hasanaj

5. Conclusions

The analysis of conflict in the 21st century conducted thus far has revealed a paradigmatic transformation that goes far beyond mere technological innovations, extending to an overall rethinking of patterns of social order and modes of interaction among the actors involved. In this context, the need for critical and interdisciplinary reflection on the implications of these new patterns of conflict, especially in relation to their ability to distort global social and political dynamics, emerges strongly.

New warfare scenarios, characterized by an increasing interdependence between physical and digital dimensions, raise important ethical and strategic questions. On the one hand, the spread of cyber and cognitive warfare has introduced modes of conflict that exploit the technological and cognitive vulnerabilities of contemporary societies. On the other, the asymmetric and often invisible nature of these conflicts makes it difficult to apply traditional instruments of international law and foreign policy.

A key criticism directed at these developments concerns the potential for distortions and manipulations that undermine the stability of democratic societies. Information manipulation, dissemination of disinformation, and targeted psychological operations can create deep internal divisions, eroding trust in democratic institutions and processes (Reed, 2008). This phenomenon is particularly dangerous because it acts insidiously and persistently, making an effective and coordinated response difficult.

In addition, the evolution of hybrid and cognitive wars raises questions about the sustainability of current models of social order. The integration of advanced technologies and the decentralization of military operations challenge the ability of nations to maintain control and internal security. This scenario requires not only an adaptation of defense strategies, but also a rethinking of global security policies that takes into account the new power dynamics and interconnections between the various domains of conflict.

In light of these considerations, it is crucial to try to propose a new ethics of warfare that addresses the challenges posed by emerging technologies and unconventional strategies. This includes the need to create international regulatory frameworks that can effectively

regulate cyber and cognitive operations, as well as promote greater cooperation among states in order to prevent and counter transnational threats.

Finally, it might be useful (if not a priority) to begin to devise strategies to promote greater public awareness of the risks associated with new forms of conflict. In this sense, educating populations to recognize information manipulation techniques and disinformation strategies could contribute significantly to strengthening social resilience and preserving internal cohesion in the face of these threats.

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