

Review - Economy of Force

Written by Jan Tattenberg

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JAN TATTENBERG, SEP 3 2016

Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social

By Patricia Owens

Cambridge University Press, 2015

I would like to start with a disclaimer. *Economy of Force*, it must be said, is not an easy book. It requires work on the part of the reader. In exchange, it will take the reader on a *tour de force*. It has already been accorded some of the highest possible honours, having been subject of an ISA roundtable, a special section in *Security Dialogue*, a symposium at *The Disorder of Things*, and recipient of BISA's Susan Strange Prize in 2016. As there is, in other words, no shortage of high quality engagements with Owens' book, I will restrict myself to a short introduction of the book, and its subject matter, necessary given that much of its terrain might be unfamiliar, as well as some questions on the nature of politics and war, as understood by Owens. *Economy of Force* seeks to uncover a lost genealogy of the social (understood as a space of policy intervention), and thereby remove politics as such from the continuum of violence on which it is habitually placed. What all of this means I will try and make clear in the following paragraphs.

Owens begins with the 'domestic analogy'. According to this analogy, we can liken domestic relations between people to foreign relations between states. One example is the scaling up of Thomas Hobbes' state of nature. In other words, the state is likened to an individual. We need not look far to see how powerful this analogy is. A recent iteration is part of the common sense justification for austerity: an individual should not live beyond their means, and neither, therefore, should a state. Via the etymology of 'domestic' (*domus* being Latin for house, as we are reminded), Owens arrives at the centrality of the household. Households are defined as historically and geographically variable units of rule, their purpose the administration of life necessities. The household includes more than the modern family, containing slaves and others who are not kin. It is ruled by a male head of household (called the *despot*), who exercises absolute, despotic, control over those within it. The inhabitants are dominated, subject to violence and repression, with the aim of being domesticated, that is, to submit to the authority of the despot. Household rule, for Owens, is the distinct opposite of politics, properly understood. Etymology, it quickly becomes clear, is deployed to great effect in *Economy of Force*. The household is traced through an ancient and a feudal iteration before we arrive at the moment pivotal to Owens' argument, the crisis of the nineteenth century.

The central crisis Owens is concerned with is expressed by what came to be called the Social Question: 'was it possible, and if so how, to meet the demands of the newly organised workers and native peasants without simultaneously destroying capitalism and liberal empire?' (63) There was, in other words, a contradiction between nascent democracy, propagated by the Haitian, French, and American revolutions, and capitalism and empire. For Owens, intervention in the social becomes the answer. Social policy is the way in which this contradiction will be managed. Yet the social is not 'discovered' at this moment as is often claimed. Instead, Owens argues, the social is the distinctly capitalist form of household rule, scaled up, as it is concerned with the administration of life necessities. Social administration, therefore, displaced truly political forms of thought and action. The implications could not be greater, especially for critical theorists, as social theory looks to be complicit in the maintenance of a project of rule. In constructing such a historical account of the emergence of distinctly social thought and practice, Owens sets up, to borrow from Andrew Davenport, politics as insurgency, the social as counter-insurgency.

Owens' genealogy of social government, or rule as the more accurate term under the circumstances might be, via the

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household, takes her to five 20th and 21st century counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns. Here, Owens argues, we see the constitution of social government in practice, 'armed social work', as COIN came to be described. The British wars in Malaya and Kenya, the American ones in Vietnam, Afghanistan and, Iraq provide variations on this theme. For the purposes of the review, however, I wish to leave these behind (though the reader should not, they're original and critical readings of the highest calibre), and move on to the conclusion.

It is in the conclusion that Owens finally unravels what has been the underlying tension throughout the book: the antagonism between the 'properly political' and the social. I will briefly summarise before raising some questions which arose in my reading of the book.

Not surprisingly, given Owens' previous work, Hannah Arendt looms large throughout *Economy of Force*. Yet in the conclusion, she finally comes to the fore. In fact, Owens' definition of politics is drawn from Arendt, being the coming together of plural equals who possess the capacity to make new beginnings, nativity as Arendt called it. In acting politically, people produce power and assert their liberty. In her essay on violence, Arendt made clear that power and violence were opposites, that 'where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent.' And so it is in *Economy of Force*, although the opposition is expressed in terms of politics and household rule, the former being an expression of power, the latter of violence. It is this which I meant when, at the beginning of this essay, I referred to the removal of politics from the continuum of violence. Owens states unequivocally, that 'there is nothing except adherence to Clausewitz to suggest that war is the continuation of politics, properly understood.' (285) This, it seems to me, is absolutely correct. Part of the problem seems to be that Clausewitz's adage has largely been regarded, even by critical scholars, as immutable truth. War must be political activity, what other way was there to make sense of the 'reciprocal activity of killing and maiming people'? (285) In this, critical scholars were not better than IR realists, all referring to the ontology of war as essentially political contestation, though what this political content encompassed was historically variable.

What has been created by Owens is the space for a truly critical intervention in our understanding of war. That is, critical in the sense of being emancipatory. In the phrase of Marc von Boemcken, Owens helps us move from a 'critical war studies' to a 'critique of war' (2016). Part of the problem has been the reliance, in recent years, of critical studies of war and the military on Michel Foucault, who famously inverted Clausewitz to declare that 'politics is the continuation of war by other means.' (2003: 15) This has led to a categorical problem, as war and politics became impossible to unravel. Although this conceptual problem allowed scholars to pay closer attention to the always blurred boundaries between war and peace, it came, as Owens would no doubt agree, at a price. The price was an understanding of politics which clearly distinguished itself from violence.

References:

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